

SINGAPORE  
TO  
COLOMBO



SINGAPORE TO COLOMBO

*This diary has been produced for the family of  
Major Inglis, so that his friends may have a  
permanent record of his experiences*

*100 Copies have been printed  
for private circulation*

No.

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SINGAPORE  
TO  
COLOMBO

*The diary of*  
MAJOR COLIN W. A. INGLIS  
Indian Engineers  
*13th February to 5th March, 1942*

LONDON 1945



Territory occupied by Japan by 1-3-42.  
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ROUTE from SINGAPORE to PADANG  
13th.FEBRUARY - 1st. MARCH 1942



## PROLOGUE

*Extract from a letter from Singapore, dated December 21st, 1941.*

. . . And here we are all in the news! I leave you to guess our feelings, when at 4 o'clock on that Monday morning we were wakened by gun-fire and aeroplane engines. I said drearily to myself, 'Practice,' and wondered why it had to be so realistic and at that time of the morning, when the unmistakable 'whoosh' of a bomb brought me to my senses, and my feet in one bound. I began 'duty' at 8.30 that morning, firewatching at the Office on a 24-hour spell. We share it between us, getting 24 hours each every five days or so, so it is not exactly exhausting. The other days when one is off duty are spent in trying to 'black-out' the house. This, being built purposely to encourage every whiff of air to pass through, presents some task, but it is slowly becoming liveable in at night.

As you can realise at the moment, home isn't like home at all with the women and children from the north passing through. Poor devils, they have all my sympathy, and one is glad to do all one can, but I do so often wonder why the authorities consider a purely bachelor establishment a suitable 'venue' for unaccompanied wives and children—from both points of view, theirs and mine. . . .





## SINGAPORE TO COLOMBO

*Friday, 13th February, 1942*

A second night on the concrete floor of the office plan room where many of us are sleeping has merely served to convince me that my impression of its hardness the previous night were not exaggerated. Never, when I designed the building in 1938, did I suspect we'd use it as a dormitory.

However, at least one good point has emerged from its construction. Owing to the high local factor of safety for reinforced concrete, the building is practically bomb-proof. One could wish it was mosquito-proof as well.

Harris and I got the breakfast (tinned pilchards, yesterday's loaf, tinned butter and marmalade) for our "mess" while Steed made our beds and tidied up. Hutton boiled the water for tea, and old ——— just looked frail.

I had meant to try and get back to my house this morning, but the Japanese were shelling the town from the direction of Bukit Tienah, and any trip far afield looked as though it might become unpleasant. However, Hutton gave me the keys of his safe which had been moved up to Goodwood Hill when the Architectural Staff evacuated up there, and I said I'd try and make the trip later if things quietened down, and rescue his wife's jewellery.

The smoke all over the city seems to be thicker and over a greater area. It is impossible to tell how much of it is caused by enemy action and how much by our own denial policy.

Apart from one or two shells landing round the corner in High Street, the morning was fairly uneventful. Air raids, of course, were taking place on and off, but no one bothered

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much. The siren now just sounds the "Alert" in the morning about 7.30 and leaves it at that.

As many members of the staff as managed to get to the office—and some were resident there like ourselves, their homes having either been cut off or rendered unhealthy by the enemy—were paid  $1\frac{1}{2}$  month's salary as a precaution just in case things went wrong. No one can understand how the Japanese have held out so long on the Island in view of our overwhelming superiority in men and guns. Of course, the Navy and the R.A.F. have had to withdraw because of the vulnerability and destruction of their bases, but rumour has it that we outnumbered the enemy 3 to 1 in men and our guns are vastly bigger and heavier; those, that is, that can be swung around to meet the attack coming from the opposite direction to that suspected by the planners of Singapore's defence.

Also, the — may have something to do with it, as more and more of them seem to be roaming about town, armed with loaded Tommy guns and rifles, very drunk for the most part, and with neither officers nor discipline.

Even so, the news, such as it is, is much better. The Jap tanks which were causing so much unpleasantness in Goodwood Hill, when I was up at the house yesterday, by firing from Bukit Tienah road, have been driven back, both McRitchie and Pierce reservoirs are still in our hands, so water is more than plentiful, and the radio yesterday announced that the Americans have landed and captured Penang, and that another force landing at Port Dickson has occupied Kuala Lumpur. Some people are scoffing at the story, but most of us, grasping at any straw of comfort, believe this.

Lunch, curiously similar to breakfast, we had about 1.30 p.m., during which we discussed the disappearance of Messrs. —, — and —, etc., from the — House,

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where they were all staying. The explanation which was most favoured (and which was subsequently confirmed) was that they had ratted on the Wednesday, two days previously, on the Blue Funnel boat to Australia. And this on the very day that H.E. the Governor had sent round a proclamation that no Malayan Government official would leave Singapore without his express permission!

Half-way through lunch came a message that the Director of Public Works wanted to see us all in the Municipal Building at once. Off we set, crossing High Street at a gallop between shell bursts, and arrived to find the Municipality swarming. Speculation as to the reason for the summons was rife, and was not lulled by those coming from the office wherein the Director was interviewing us one by one. Some looked pleased and relieved and gave the "thumbs up" sign, but any guess as to what this meant was contradicted by others, who looked more than stunned, and who, when questioned, merely turned their thumbs floorwards. However, my turn came soon, and in I went. Nunn and Coales, looking very sombre, handed me a slip of paper on which was written: "You will report at Telok Ayer Basin at 3.00 p.m. to-day. Baggage, one suitcase, with a small amount of food. Absolute secrecy will be observed." Next they handed me a pass to leave Singapore Island, signed by Brigadier Simpson (Internal Security Officer), and the interview was over.

So that was that—we were to go. Feeling quite sick, I rejoined the others, and, in bursts across the openings between the buildings, we returned to the office.

The plan room was filled with some of the Asiatic Staff, and before their eyes we all started to squeeze as much as possible into the largest suit-cases we possessed, knowing in view of the "secrecy to be observed" that we would have to

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leave them without a word of apology or thanks. Philip D'Aleneida, Ibrahim bin Dadameah, Kurn, Claud Eleer, Sabapathy—they all must have known we were about to run out on them, but never one look or one word of reproach did I catch. It would have been easier if I had, for it would have been unjustified, as we were being transferred to Java to carry on work there which we could no longer do in Singapore. But no, they seemed to take it for granted that the white man would run away just when it became too uncomfortable or too dangerous. I don't know about the others, but I felt the complete rat.

I told Ahinad, my syce, who was still living in the house when I was up there yesterday, that if anything should happen and I had to leave, I would put the keys of the car in the near front wheel hub-cap—never dreaming that within twenty-four hours I should be doing it. A stupid gesture, really, for even if Ahinad could manage to collect the car undamaged, he would never be allowed to keep it.

Harris and I went down to Telok Ayer together in his car, which we abandoned as near the dock gates as possible. Then, struggling with our immensely heavy suitcases, we pushed into the crowd. For the next two hours we were there being surged to and fro, squeezing up to let lorries pass into the docks, balancing on one foot while a frantic mother searches for her children, sitting hunched on my now rapidly deteriorating suitcase while a Eurasian family of at least fifty say "Good-bye" to Grandma over our heads, pushing backwards to let some of the Hospital Sisters through, being pushed forward as those behind made another determined effort to reach the gate, swaying and cursing, while a burning building opposite poured more and more smoke into the sky.

The crowd swelling every moment, showed signs of getting

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out of hand, but a soldier on duty at the gate fired a burst from his Tommy gun over our heads, and things quietened a little. Finally came a call for those with passes signed by Brigadier Simpson, and off we struggled once more towards the gate, dragging suit-cases with us. Eventually, however, we were through and soon reached the dockside. At the end of the dock was a pill-box manned by Singapore Volunteers. Harris and I stopped and spoke to them. This was our Company, in which we had been for four years until taken off to work on Fleet Air Arm projects. The three Sams were there—Waller, McNee and Denham—and they expressed some envy of our getting out while the getting was good. We were inclined to agree, although in some ways the feeling of rattling still remained (it still does, some six months later). We then trooped along the quayside, lumping those bloody suit-cases, just able to stagger under their weight. A water-boat was alongside and people were going aboard, when someone said "Air raid" or something, so we shot into one of the galvanized iron go-downs and nestled on the floor. In a few moments we heard bombs coming and just held everything. Then came a succession of ear-splitting roars and things began to fall down my neck. "This," said I to myself, "is the *end*." And certainly it seemed as though the building had begun to disintegrate. Wondering what it would be like to be bombed on the skull by a steel truss and recover consciousness to find myself trapped and flames burning all around, I realized that all seemed to be over. Covered in filth and bits of coal, we arose looking rather silly, and went outside to find the go-down next door looking even sillier where it had been struck. Then we embarked on the water-boat and chugged out into the harbour. We came alongside the S.S. *Kuala*, one of the Straits Steamships, and started to go aboard, when the Japs

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came back on their second round. I had one foot on each ship when I heard the first bomb falling, but was well inside the *Kuala*, flat on my face on the deck before it burst. However, nothing hit us, and the P.W.D. party trooped up on to the poop deck.

The *Kuala* was built to carry about twenty-five passengers, but about 600 odd people were eventually put aboard—all very matey. We sailed at dusk, leaving Singapore blazing in a hundred different spots, but nevertheless the City proper looked comparatively unharmed!

Going forrard in search of some water I met Mary Skehain, Paddy Lowry, two sisters from the Hospital. They told me that on their part evacuation was not compulsory, but was a matter of choice for each person.

Returning to the poop deck, I squeezed into my place between Roger Steed and Burke-Gaffney. Supper began. Corned beef, tinned fruit and assorted cream biscuits, washed down with whisky and water. Shortly we settled down for the night, as there was nothing else to do—even smoking being forbidden owing to black-out regulations. Using my tin hat as a pillow, I lay down as far as possible on the hard deck. Being unable to stretch fully outright, it was some time before I managed to get off to sleep, but not for long. The hardness of the deck and the little bumps of oakum which came through the planks, added to a wind which was distinctly cold, woke me shivering. I opened my suit-case and started to grope for an old shirt by feel. I didn't want to dirty a nice clean one, because I didn't know then how long we'd be on the voyage, or how long we'd be in Java before coming on a dhoby. Then Roger Steed woke up complaining of the cold, produced a bottle of whisky which went down like fire, and thawed out the worst.

## *Singapore to Colombo*

*Saturday, 14th February*

Awoke at 5 a.m. or so as dawn was breaking, feeling bruised in every part of my body. My, that deck was uncomfortable. As the light grew stronger we found we were close to a little island which turned out to be Pompong in the Lingga Archipelago. Here we anchored just in front of a Yangtsekiang gunboat, the *Tien Kwang*, which had also crossed from Singapore the night before. Further out was another steamer at anchor, the *Kwang Wu*, which we months afterwards heard had been bombed and abandoned the day before.

Shortly, we of the P.W.D. were formed into working parties to land on Pompong to cut down brushwood in order to try and camouflage the *Kuala* to look like an island. Dam' fool idea, too, as it would have taken nearly all the greenstuff on the island to succeed properly. However, the first working party under — was called, and we all piled into one of the ship's boats and rowed ashore. I never have much liked manual labour of any sort, and this was detestable. Climbing a slope of about 1 in 4, cutting down saplings for the most part infested with Relingas (ferocious red ants), and dragging the young tree over a rough stony beach with sore corns, was not my idea of the correct start to a day. There was, too, a nasty sour smell from the island, and a nasty feeling inside that the flying-boat which passed overhead as we landed may not, after all, have been Dutch, as we all assured each other that it must be. After a while, when we had despatched some three boat-loads of shrubbery to the *Kuala*, our breakfast arrived, consisting of a crate of dried-up biscuits, an enormous tin of bully beef, and a bucket of water. We all got busy on this, and I must confess it tasted better than I had imagined, and better than it looked. The second working party came ashore at about 10 o'clock, and we, climbing over the herbage



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in our boat, set off for the *Kuala*. The wind caught our cargo and the tide caught the boat, so it was no easy task making our way, but we did so eventually and, having unloaded the camouflage materials, climbed aboard. The *Kuala* by now looked quite preposterous with little bushes growing sparsely on her decks, and one sapling run up to each of the mast heads.

On return to our poop deck, Hutton, always resourceful and thinking of others, went off to see what he could do about a bucket of tea, and shortly returned with it—milkless, sugarless, steaming hot, and very welcome. We were just dipping our cups into it when the cry went up that bombers were approaching. We all trooped down to the main deck, which had the steel promenade deck over it, and hoped that it would be sufficient protection. The planes, however, flew over us, paying no attention, and directed their attack on to the abandoned *Kwang Wu* further out. This they sank with one salvo, and went on towards the horizon. A wild relief went through us, that perhaps they hadn't spotted us, and I said as much to Hutton. He looked graver than I've ever seen him look before and shook his head. We watched the other ship sink by the bow, milling about before the small main deck portholes, when somebody yelled from the promenade deck that the planes had turned and were coming back. The whole crowd of us sank to the deck like a *corps de ballet* and waited for what seemed like a year before we heard the planes. Their roaring was soon drowned by the whistle as the bombs began to fall, and we all snuggled closer and lower trying to burrow under the next-door person. With a series of roars the bombs exploded and the ship heaved and shuddered (so did we!). Immediately a loud hissing broke out and clouds of steam came pouring from the engine-room, the first bomb having broke the main steam pipe. All, then remembering

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the old saying about rats and traps, we surged up into the air again to find the bridge and upper deck well ablaze.

A start was made putting women and children into the ship's boat which we had left alongside when we came back from Pompong, while the rest of us dashed about throwing overboard lifebelts, seats, chairs, drawers, anything in fact that would float. I then took my shoes off to be ready in case we had to jump for it, and wandered around looking for a safe place in which to put them, not realizing that it didn't matter where they dropped. Alec Niven and I then saw a Chinese woman with two children hovering on the brink before jumping into the boat; we went to her and took her children and told her to jump and we'd pass the children down. She jumped and missed. So I passed my child to Alec and went after her. When I came up to the surface she was being dragged into the boat, so Alec passed the children to me and came in, too. Between us we got the kids into the boat and looked around to see what we could do next. It was then that I realized the difference between paddling about in a swimming pool in trunks and splashing in the ocean fully dressed, but lighted on a piece of wood about 2 ft. long, 9 in. wide, and 2 in. thick. This I tucked under me and then heard the planes returning. This time they were aiming at the *Tien Kwang*, and I saw one bomb coming down quite close. Most of the missiles exploded in the water, which gave those swimming a feeling as though their tummies were being pummelled by quickly wielded sledge hammers. Several bombs, however, fell on the rocky shore of the island, flinging great boulders and splinters in all directions, and causing a number of casualties amongst those who'd already landed. The explosion of one bomb near me in the water swamped me in its filthy black wash smelling utterly putrid, and I

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surfaced again alternately praying and cursing with fervour and fury. The two probably cancelled themselves out! Never have I felt so completely helpless as floundering in the water while these bleeding Japs dropped their eggs—helpless and at times petrified.

When things had quietened again I paddled around on my little bit of board collecting odds and ends of boards, sticks, etc., and passed these around to those who looked as though they needed them. Feeling rather like Father Christmas, I found a kapok mattress floating, so grabbed it and towed it off to two women keeping up on an oar.

Then these ruddy Japs paid a third visit, and once more our insides were subject to rough treatment. More bombs dropped on the island again, causing many casualties.

Once again comparative peace reigned, broken only by the crackling of the burning *Kuala* and the noise of ammunition aboard exploding as the flames reached it. Everybody around appeared to be more or less catered for in the way of life-jackets, spars or other supports, so I turned my mind on to my own plight. I had by this time swum or drifted somewhat west of Pompong, so thought I ought to swim back and join the others. After some minutes I doubted my judgment, for, I reasoned, would anybody land on that island in case the Japs returned and bombed it? Surely they would all make for one or other of the many islands round about. But which? I most definitely had no aspirations to emulate Robinson Crusoe, and everyone seemed to have scattered; I thought I'd make for the island almost due west of Pompong, about two miles away, and started off again. And then it was I suspected that a fairly strong current was running away from Pompong, and this was confirmed soon by coming on a dead woman, who, despite my efforts, would not be shaken off, but kept

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up with my by now somewhat hysterical swimming with the greatest of ease.

Eventually I outstripped her and, swimming on, discovered that no matter what I wanted to do, I would pass the island I'd chosen well to the south. I then began to look around for somewhere else to land—somewhere to which the current would bring me without much effort on my part. It was now about 1.30 p.m., and I'd already been in the water for two hours and was beginning to feel tired, and, strangely enough, bored. My watch, which had been so cheap, was proving its worth, if never before, by ticking valiantly. Soon I saw a most delectable island—low sandy beach and coconut palms—which meant somewhere to land and food and drink in case it should prove uninhabited. How, in the event of landing, I was to climb one of those palm trees and gather coconuts and then break through the outer husk to the nut itself, I never once considered. I only know that it spelt safety and for that reason never even tried to make some nearer islands, because mangroves grew in swamps right down to the water's edge and there was no sign of coconuts. After an hour or so I realized that that island, too, was impossible to reach, and that I was drifting past. Shortly another beach hove in sight with a few native village houses, about three miles distant. This, I decided, I must reach, for beyond it I could see nothing but swampy-looking islands (crocodiles and snakes, ugh!), then the open sea. I swam as hard as I could, shifting my wee bit of board underneath me. This, however, was too painful, and I suspected I'd got skinned (if nothing worse) when the bombs exploded under water. So I turned over on my back with the board beneath my shoulder blades and set off again. No, I would not stop and look to see if I was getting any nearer—not till I'd done one hundred strokes. On completion of those

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I turned round again and nearly sank myself. No nearer by an inch. On to my back again, this time for five hundred strokes. That took ages. So long in fact that I put a tentative foot down to feel for the bottom. No bottom, so I turned again to look. I might have known. The island still as far away was drifting away like the others. In desperation I started to shout, but without much hope of success. A husky croak emerged at the first attempt, and when I got a fairly powerful noise I discovered that the Malay for S.O.S., "Tolong," was not a word which lent itself to a really lusty bawl. However, I kept it up for the sake of appearances for a while, till I felt that the breath thus expended might come in useful in the near future. Deciding that it was now no time to be finicky, that I must get out of the water before nightfall, I set off in the opposite direction for one of the swampy islands—4.30, 5.00, 5.30, 6.00. This was awful! If I was getting nearer it was so slow as to be imperceptible to the naked eye. And with the open sea beyond and nothing else in sight, I began to wonder just what life was all about. Had I escaped all injury in Malaya in the two months of raids, escaped hurt when the docks were bombed yesterday evening, the *Kuala* this morning, just to float to an unidentified grave somewhere in the Pacific? It didn't make sense, although it looked as though nonsense was going to win. It was beginning to grow dusk and I was feeling distinctly rattled. I pulled myself up on my board to rest my arms, and, ye gods! there was a fishing boat with two Malays in it about 200 yards away!

The fishermen looked as though they were pulling up nets, and despite a yell from me they turned away and went on with their nets. Another yell on my part, and this time I waved my handkerchief, too (a nice little refined gesture I thought, considering the circumstances), and the boat turned towards

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me again. The man in the bow encouragingly waved his hand and shouted, "Don't be frightened, we're coming." "I'm not frightened," I replied with a lot of indignation and little truth. "I'm only tired." They came alongside and I tried to pull myself in, but couldn't raise myself at all. However, the fishermen came to my aid, and I came into the boat in a wet, soggy heap, head first. There were already two survivors aboard, a nurse from the Indian Medical Service and Tungku Mahmud from Trenggawu. From the boat we spotted a few more heads bobbing around, and went to pick them up, too—a Chinese girl, an Indian girl, and two Sikhs. No more survivors being in evidence we set off for an island some three miles off, but were soon leaking so badly and filling with water so quickly that it was obvious we'd never make it. The men then turned their boat to a nearer but practically uninhabited island, and while we baled with everything we could find—the Chinese girl's shoes, handkerchiefs soaked in water and squeezed overboard, bare hands, etc.—they rowed like mad, and after a while in the dusk we grounded still about 300 yards off the beach. Out we got, and dragged the boat up as far as we could through a mixture of soft mud and coral rocks. Eventually we reached dry land, and, following a path, we came on a little hut, the owners of which immediately lit an enormous bonfire and produced coconuts to drink.

After a parley, it was decided that I should go on with the fishermen to their village (they thought with only three people in it that their boat would be sufficiently seaworthy to make the trip) to try and raise what assistance was possible, both for ourselves and for the other hundreds who must have survived somewhere on one or other of the islands, and the rest of the party under the care of Tungku Mahmud would stay overnight where they were,

### *Singapore to Colombo*

and we would send a boat for them the next morning.

We climbed in again to our sloppy little sampan and set off in the darkness. By this time I was feeling rather tired, and was chattering with cold, so I collapsed into the bilge and passed out.

An hour or so later I was wakened by the men saying we had arrived, and I came to and climbed out on a little jetty. Here, an old Chinaman grasped my arm and slowly led me off. I was in a really shameful condition, teeth chattering, and as weak as a lily. My guide led me down an endless path till we came to a little hut, into which we went. Here he passed me a coolie's coat and shorts in blue cotton, and I stripped out of my dripping clinging clothes into his. Dry clothes, plus a cup of scalding Chinese tea and I was a new man. He then handed me a sack and, leading me through a room which seemed to be filled with bodies, showed me a heap of charcoal, on to which he spread my sack, and down I went to fall asleep instantly.

### *Sunday, 15th February*

On awaking, long after dawn, I discovered that the bodies over which I had picked my weary way last night all belonged to survivors from the wrecked ships, including Miss Service from Johore Hospital; Major Scobel Nicholson, whom I had met several times in the Medical Auxiliary Service Control Room in Singapore; J. B. Ross, of the Mercantile Bank; and Sir John Bagnall, of the Straits Trading Co.; and also the two women for whom I had got the kapok mattress. They said they'd soon abandoned it and taken to their oar again, as they felt the mattress was too much of a target if the Japs started machine gunning the survivors. Service had a piece of shrapnel in her right arm through the fleshy part above the



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elbow, and Major Nicholson's hands were badly damaged and burned on the palms and fingers.

From somewhere the villagers had routed up enough clothes for us all while our own were dried, and we sat around the hut discussing the situation. Our hosts would not allow us outside of the hut for fear that a Jap reconnaissance plane might spot us as Europeans, for this, they were certain, would bring sure destruction on them and their village. While respecting their (to our mind) unnecessary qualms, it was important to get out, partly because we were told there were some other survivors in another house near the jetty, and partly because I wanted to see the headman about sending help round to the other islands between Pulan Medang, where we were and Pompong, and try and bring off anyone who had been marooned. I got permission to go out in my coolie suit provided I wore an enormous Chinese coolie hat as well. This I put on, or, at least, balanced on the top of my head, and set forth, barefooted down the path along which I had so wearily stumbled the night before.

At the house over the jetty there were about twenty people gathered, none of whom I knew except — and his Chinese "wife," with whom he had turned up at embarkation yesterday. Gossip said she was a retired taxi dancer from one of the "worlds." If that be true, she must have retired many years ago judging by her looks, but she seemed to have plenty of money, which was lucky for —, for he certainly never had any. She was negotiating with some of the Chinese villagers to stay in Pulan Medang for the duration of Japanese trouble.

Tungku Mahmud had turned up with his party from the island where we had left them the night before, and was negotiating with the headman for boats to take us on to Senajang, which everyone said was a grand spot—two Chinese

### *Singapore to Colombo*

hotels, shops, a Dutch Contrôleur, medicinal supplies for the wounded, plenty of food for the extra mouths—in fact, everything which Pulan Medang lacked. Tungku arranged for us to hire a large and a small prahm and to leave that evening at dusk, as daylight travel would be fraught with the danger of reconnaissance planes and immediate destruction. Tungku himself was arranging to return to Pompong, so I said I'd go with him, as I wanted to find out how many of my friends were safe. For all I knew, I might at that moment, by virtue of being the only survivor, be the Director of Public Works! On this idea of accompanying Tungku, the villagers jumped immediately. It would, they said, be madness. It was risky enough for Tungku to go as it was! Certainly he was a Malay, but his features were of Northern Malaya and different from the islanders, but for a European . . .! The headman enlarged on the theme: "One aeroplane see a white man in a boat, then 'whiz,' 'boom,' 'dead!'" "Bomb," he added by way of explanation. Then he went on to how the Japs would know by seeing Mahmud's boat that we had come from Pulan Medang so immediately they would go there and whiz, whiz, whiz, boom, boom, boom, they'd all be dead. I tried to explain that they wouldn't be likely to waste a bomb costing so many thousands of dollars on a small sampan with two or three people in it, but he rather haughtily replied that Mahmud's was a very good boat, and he'd helped to build it himself! So that was that.

Tungku, however, seemed quite happy about going alone, and suggested then that I should look after the party leaving for Senajang that evening. We then made a list of the names of survivors for Tungku to take with him to Pompong, and a list of supplies which I was to endeavour to send back to Pulan Medang from Senajang—mostly medical and food.

### *Singapore to Colombo*

The medical stores were very urgent, as we already had several wounded cases, although at that time most of them were able to move, and we decided to take everyone possible out of Pulan Medang to leave as much room as we could for any more wounded whom Tungku might find on the other islands. Also, if possible, I was to communicate with Java and tell them of our plight, but this, of course, depended on the telegraph facilities at Senajang still being in working order.

About mid-day our host brought us a meal—rice, dried fish and Chinese pickles—which vanished in about three minutes, so ravenous were we all. This was followed by coffee, which was delicious, and then most of us stretched out on the floor of the hut and got in some more sleep while waiting for dusk to fall.

Japanese planes passed overhead three times during the day—twice in the morning and once about 6 o'clock in the evening, just as we had decided it would be safe to go out in the open. There was, however, plenty of cover, and, in any case, I don't suppose now they were looking for us, or would have been very interested in us had we been found, but after yesterday's experience one didn't feel like tempting fate too much.

The headman came down then to our hut with two bottles of black coffee to sustain us on the trip, and I asked him how long it would take us to get to Senajang. He replied that all depended on the wind, given a decent breeze we could make it in ten—twelve hours, but if there was no wind. . . ? it might take two days. He then said that he had put some bamboo matting in both of the boats, and requested us to cover ourselves up with it as soon as it got daylight if we didn't reach our destination before dawn. That was the only condition

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under which the boatmen would take us. They were good souls, those islanders. In a perpetual state of fear of Japanese nastiness, yet they helped us all they could.

Darkness soon fell, and we went out to the jetty to embark. Eight people got into the small prahm, and off they went. Half an hour later, so as to give them a start, for it was considered inadvisable to go in convoy, on the grounds that one small boat would not look suspicious, but two together might look organized and arouse curiosity, twenty of us climbed into the larger boat. With our backs against the thwarts and feet in the middle, we settled down as comfortably as we could, but the prahm was never built, of course, as a passenger ship, and sitting tightly packed as we were, with the feet of the man opposite, stuck in your armpit, conditions were somewhat cramped.

Once clear of Pulan Medang we hoisted sail and began to travel at a reasonable pace. Praying that the wind would hold, my thoughts began to dwell on what we would find at Senajang. Creature comforts came first and, thinking of the two Chinese hotels, I pondered on the possibilities of a bath, a shave, a well-cooked, well-served meal, and maybe even some new clothes, the ones I had on showing some signs of wear and tear. Nor would this night in the prahm improve them, for it wasn't as clean as it might be, and the water slopping around under the rough floor boards, if anything like its smell, would tinge them even more. However, it was only for one night, and to-morrow would see us in civilization. Gradually I dropped off, but like everyone else on board, I was too soft really to ignore the physical discomforts of the boat; the cold water slopping out of the bilges acted as a further deterrent to unbroken rest. However, eventually I fell into a sounder sleep for a while and woke up freezingly—

## *Singapore to Colombo*

*Monday, 16th February*

—cold, stiff, sore and wet as dawn was showing signs of breaking. The wind had died and we were using the sweeps to get us along. We were close inshore to an island, and, as we rounded every point and headland, I hoped to see the little Dutch town which meant so much to us. On and on. The boatmen, in answer to a query, replied in that phrase which we were to hear so often repeated, “Lagi satu jam” (“one hour more”). The hour passed and the sun rose, and the chief boatman giving his oar to another, produced the pieces of matting and asked us to cover ourselves. This we did, thereby doubling discomfort, for it was then impossible even to sit up to stretch. Another hour, the monotony only broken by the passage of an aeroplane overhead. A nasty moment, as we all waited for that too familiar whistle of a bomb dropping. However, logic asserted itself and proved to be right. After all, trade between these countless islands of the Lingga and Rhio Archipelagoes is all carried on by boats similar to the one we were in, and it wasn’t sense to imagine that the Japs would bomb every little sampan they saw. Sure enough the noise of the plane’s engine passed away and, finally, about 10 o’clock, we arrived at Senajang.

But, when the covers were pulled off us, the bang my heart made as it fell into my feet must have been heard all over the Pacific. A row of single-storey wooden and tin shacks lining the water’s edge confronted us, with one red painted corrugated iron two-storey block in the middle at the jetty. Where were those dreams of baths and new clothes now?

However, at least we could go ashore and stretch after that sardine-like voyage, and, doing so, were met at the entrance to the jetty by Ungku Amir, the headman of the district. He had set aside the two-storied building, which was part shop

### *Singapore to Colombo*

and part Chinese lodging-house, for our reception and use, and had collected armsful of clothes for those in need. Camp beds were provided, and the wounded were put on them, but alas! for the hope of sending anything back to Pulan Medang in the way of medical stores or food, as there was practically nothing in Senajang, even for the wounded we had brought with us. When the people were settled in as comfortably as possible, I went with Ungku Amir to his office and discussed the situation with him. Briefly, it wasn't good. They had enough food for themselves, but a large influx of refugees would strain their resources unfairly. Nor was there any chances of laying in more stores, as everything came from Singapore, and the trader who went to and fro had returned the evening before with a story of being machine-gunned as he was nearing Singapore, and had to turn back with an empty boat.

It seemed likely that our numbers would be increased greatly if Tungku Mahmud sent on any survivors he found, as he had arranged to do, and the best thing for everyone seemed to be to move on further yet and make room for the new arrivals when they came. Where, then, should we go, I asked Ungku Amir, and he said the only hope we had was to make for Dabo on the island of Singkep. There was a hospital there for those who were wounded, but who could still travel, a European community, a Dutch Contrôleur and—better than anything—a wireless station and a steamer service to Java!

How could we get there was my next question. On this point, and one that seemed rather important to me, the Ungku was vague. No, he couldn't think of any way. What about that large motor launch belonging to the trader? No petrol. Well, then, there are plenty of prahms and sam-

### *Singapore to Colombo*

pans? Agreed, but none of the men are willing to risk the trip. How far was it? Oh, with a favourable wind, about ten hours, but might take fifteen or twenty hours. I told him we were not short of money, and, of course, would pay whatever price was asked for the hire of men and boats to take us over.

Otherwise, if we couldn't get away, we were already quite a party, and more would be coming and soon there'd be no food at all. That, he agreed, would be most unpleasant, and said he'd use the influence of his Government position to procure sufficient crew for us. I said better to leave that evening if possible, but he couldn't guarantee the men by then, and said he'd make arrangements for us to leave at 6 o'clock the following morning, with four sampans and sufficient food and water in each boat for us and the crews. I mentioned that night travel was considered more advisable, but he replied that the route was too difficult at night, and anyway, if we spaced the boats by an hour's interval between each and covered ourselves with matting it should be all right. On that I left him, truly grateful for his help and hoping no hitch would occur as so often does with Malayan-made arrangements.

Returning to the lodging-house, I found the place a seething mass of people of all ages and both sexes, and in varying states of health. Another boat load of survivors, lured by tales of the golden paradise of Senajang (two Chinese hotels, shops, etc.!) told them by the outer islanders, had turned up. The lodging-house was obviously too small for everyone, besides, some of the women (and some of the men, too), for that matter, were seriously ill, and a certain segregation of the sexes would be advisable. Off again to Ungku's office, this time to ask permission to occupy an uninhabited native house opposite the lodging-house and use it for the men, leaving



### *Singapore to Colombo*

the women in possession of the lodging-house. To this he agreed, and gave orders to have the house opened and swept out—and later sent down two camp beds. The men moved over, the serious ones were put to bed, and peace reigned. Service and the other sisters were doing noble work with what means they had—cleansing wounds and bandaging them, and generally getting the sick and wounded more settled and happy.

Then I found a shop (but was neither the first nor last to do so, and its stock was cleared by sundown) and bought a sarong, a cotton singlet, a pair of Chinese wooden sandals, a towel, a piece of bright pink soap, a toothbrush, and some tooth paste and went off looking for somewhere to clean up. In the garden of the Chandu (opium) shop there was a well fenced around with bits of corrugated iron, so in I went. I bathed, brushed my teeth, washed my shirt, shorts, vest and pants, and put on my sarong, singlet and wooden cloggers and came out half an hour later feeling better than I would have thought possible. Hanging my clothes on nearby hibiscus bushes to dry, I clattered into the village again and came on a barber's shop. Miracles still happen! I had considered letting my beard grow, and judging by the feel it was doing nicely, but when I saw myself in the mirror for the first time for four days, I discovered to my horror that the beard about which I had so many hopes, was coming out tinged with white at the points of the chin! So I was shaved, and that completed the feeling of being reborn.

And there was a coffee shop just opposite which had some biscuits for sale. The coffee was marvellous, strong and black and very sweet. I left there fit for anything!

On arriving back at our headquarters, Service met me and told me of a girl, a Dr. Craig, who had little chance of survival.

### *Singapore to Colombo*

She had developed peritonitis and it was only a question of time. A third visit to the long-suffering Ungku Amir, to see what arrangements he would let us make for her burial if she died, as, of course, interment in a Mohammedan cemetery would not be allowed, and I was not sure if he would permit a Christian burial anywhere near the village. I suggested getting a boat and burying her at sea, but Ungku wouldn't hear of it. There was a small uninhabited island across from Senajang. If Dr. Craig died, he would have a coffin made for her and lend us a boat to take her across to that island.

A meal was waiting when I returned to our quarters—rice and dried fish. It's extraordinary how palatable dried fish is when you're hungry as we all were. This washed down with coconut milk revived us all sufficiently to make arrangements for another boatload of people who had just come in.

This lot took some settling in as there were more wounded among them, some of whom badly needed proper medical attention as soon as possible, but who were not fit to undertake the uncertainties of the voyage to Singkep Island in the size of sailing boats which Ungku Amir could provide.

J. B. Ross and I got together then and made a list of all those able to move on—total number, twenty-eight, which made seven per boat. We divided them up as evenly as possible, putting one responsible person in charge of each boat, who was to see that the people covered up on the approach of aircraft, dish out food and water, etc., and who would look after their party if we got separated. Messrs. Ross, Grant (both of whom did splendidly), another man (who was not such a lucky choice), and I were to take a boat each and planned to leave at one hour's interval, starting at dawn. In my boat I put the three Indian nurses and three Sikhs, thinking it better to keep them all together, and in the others split up the

### *Singapore to Colombo*

European men and women as seemed best balanced. Of the European Hospital sisters, they arranged among themselves which of them should stay with the wounded and come on in the more speedy and spacious craft which we hoped to (and did) send from Singkep, and which should come with us. All other passengers were those who were fit enough and rested enough to take the trip.

Then we started to settle the wounded in for the night, bathing and dressing wounds where possible and generally doing what little we could to ease them. The indefatigable Sisters made out a roster of night watches, so that one would be awake to attend to any urgent case, and I arranged to sleep on the verandah of the men's house to be within call.

I say I arranged to sleep on the verandah, and said it airily enough at the time, but I'd reckoned without thirty-three years of soft lying, and the body's revolt after a night on deck in the *Kuala*, a night on a heap of charcoal, and a night cramped up in a small fishing boat, and when eventually I lay down on the uneven boards of the verandah it was certainly not to sleep. Not, that is, in the accustomed way of going to sleep. My pillow was made up of my newly-washed shirt, shorts and underclothes folded while slightly damp to get that laundered and ironed look (after all, must have something decent to land back in civilization with!), but great care had to be taken not to disturb this bundle and get it all creased (didn't want to look as if I'd slept in my clothes on arrival, dammit!), but comfort stopped there. I never knew I had so many prominent joints in my body before, and all of them hurt. Then, just as I found a position which seemed to be less uncomfortable than others, would come a voice from inside: "Is anyone awake?" This was answered generally by a lot of grunts from everyone concerned, and followed by either,

### *Singapore to Colombo*

"Could I have a drink, please?" or "Could I have my pot, please?" In either case, I rolled over on to my feet, a cup of water or an old tin basin. This latter, though very easy to insert in the case of men who were so badly wounded they couldn't move, was hell and all to remove when the patient was finished owing to its wide sloping sides. Even this was a picnic compared to carrying it over an uneven creaky floor in pitch blackness, strewn with bodies, without spilling a drop.

#### *Tuesday, 17th February*

Around 1.30 a.m. the Sister on duty came across to say she thought Dr. Craig was dying, so I went over. The poor girl was practically unconscious, but seemed comfortable and not in any way unhappy.

Service woke up and we went outside into the night. Wandering up and down the little village street we talked in low tones, trying to decide the best thing to do, while the crickets whirled noisily all around, and an optimistic rooster disturbed the peace in his harem.

Service had been keeping up Dr. Craig's strength with brandy which I had found in the "shop," hoping to sustain her long enough to reach hospital at Dabo or Singkep. However, as this even at the most optimistic reckoning could not be hoped for within thirty-six hours, and then only with everything in our favour, she said it would not be possible to keep reviving the Doctor all that while, and even if it were she couldn't stand the journey. What should we do? With further doses she might last till morning or, at a stretch, midday, but without any more, an hour or so was the limit. The girl, when conscious, was in great pain, both mental and physical, and with no further dose she would relapse soon into coma and die, and this seemed the kindest thing to do, as there was no

### *Singapore to Colombo*

ultimate chance of saving her. Also, this way, brutal as it sounded, would enable us to see that she received proper and decent burial before leaving, and we could not postpone our departure as it was vital to get as many as possible away to make room for any others who might come, and also to reach somewhere from where all the supplies so urgently needed could be sent.

We went back to the lodging-house and I persuaded Service to go back to sleep as she'd had little, if any, for three days. Dr. Craig's condition was much the same, but she was sleeping and breathing quietly and evenly, and the Sister on duty promised to waken me if any change took place. Back on to the men's verandah, across the street where O'Grady, sitting in a daze in a chair, asked if there were any beds to spare. I said not, to which he grunted in reply, "O God, I *must* get some sleep!" If I hadn't been so tired I'd have laughed. What did he imagine we were all trying to do? No sooner had I gingerly lowered my bones to the floor when came the sad, soft cry, "Is anyone awake? I want my pot." The unavoidable noise connected with this operation aroused the next door man, who started groaning. His leg was hurting, and investigation showed that he'd wriggled the dressings loose and his leg was hanging out of bed. By candlelight I managed to get him back properly into bed and rebandaged his wounds, popped the pot under him, and he, too, fell asleep.

While I was skittling about with a tap at the back of the house, washing up, the Sister came over the street again and said Dr. Craig's end was very near, so I went over and, together with the Sister and Service, sat beside the poor girl, who was by now unconscious, until she died. It was now nearly 4 o'clock, and nothing more could be done until daylight. Rather than disturb everyone else in the room by removing

### *Singapore to Colombo*

her, we just covered her with a sheet and went on with the job of helping out the living.

At dawn, I went down to the jetty to see if there were any signs of activity near the boats, but no one was stirring. However, Ungku Amir, true to his word, appeared soon after and with him a Chinese coffin-maker. This latter squatted down, according to local custom, in the street outside the house and started to knock up the coffin, and leaving Service to attend to the composure of the body, went with Ungku to the jetty again, checking boatmen and stores. Around 6.30 a.m. the first boat was ready, and calling the names of the people on the list drawn up the day previously, J. B. Ross set off with his party.

By this time Dr. Craig's body was coffined, so handing the list to Grant to send off the next boat at 7.30, we put the coffin into a sampan, and with two or three of Dr. Craig's friends, and three coolies, we set off for the opposite island. Arriving there, we chose the nicest spot we could out of sight of Senajang, in a little clearing above but overlooking a sandy beach with hibiscus and coconut palms around, and took turns to dig the grave.

When this was deep enough we lowered the coffin into it and, commending her soul to God, threw in some hibiscus flowers and filled up the grave. On top we set some big stones in the earth in the shape of a cross, and planted a cutting of hibiscus at the head and the foot. Crude, but all we could manage.

We got back just as Grant was leaving in the third boat, the second having been duly despatched.

I then went round to Ungku Amir's office and thanked him again for all he'd done, and got from him a list of stores and supplies which he wanted from Singkep, and also a letter from him to the Dutch Contrôleur. Then down to the coffee

### *Singapore to Colombo*

shop, where they had just finished baking their rolls. Three cups of thick black coffee and three new hot rolls and I felt like a million.

Thence to the jetty to superintend the stores and embarkation of our own, the fourth boat, and finally at 9.30 we were off.

The boatmen rowed till they were well clear of Senajang and, catching a fine breeze, we hoisted sail and went spanking across the glinting water. That was a glorious day. We still had a few cigarettes, the sun was shining, and even the Indians felt more cheerful. On five occasions we had to get under cover of matting while enemy aircraft passed on patrol, but were unmolested. The Malays always heard the planes long before we did, and immediately pulled the matting over us, forbidding us to talk at the same time, on the grounds that the Japanese aeroplanes could distinguish between European and Asiatic speech enunciation. But between these periods of hot, dark silence broken only by the slap of the waves against our bows, the roar of the plane engines and the whispered "Jesu . . . Maria . . . save us . . . Christ . . . have mercy on us" from one of the nurses, the day was perfect. Sunshine, good breeze, a successive string of beautiful islands of all shapes and sizes, and finally knowledge that our Odyssey was all but finished and that that evening, or next morning at latest, we should be back among home comforts, kept us all cheerful, which even the discomforts of our craft could not wholly dispel. We were sore and stiff, admittedly, from squatting on hard, uneven boards—the vessel was not nearly broad enough to lie down across in—and any particularly boisterous wave slopped in over the top, but no matter. We were near the end.

About 2.30 we anchored at a little island where there was a fresh-water spring, and our boatmen began to boil the rice for our (and their) meal. The women went ashore and washed.



### *Singapore to Colombo*

I swam around in my underpants and the sikhs sat huddled in the stern. When the cooking was finished we set sail again and had our meal as we sailed. I'd bought a tin of curried chicken and a tin of pineapple cubes at the "shop" in Senajang, which was about all I could afford, as I had to husband my slender resources to pay for the boats, but these mixed with the boiled rice made a delicious meal, with coffee to follow. On and on we sailed, and as dusk was falling asked the boatman the chances of getting in that night. He replied that that all depended on the tide. If it were low, or if he couldn't find the channel in the dark, we'd have to anchor off till daylight.

Shortly after dark we were hailed by a voice which turned out to belong to one of the boatmen from another of our party, and we discovered that all the other three boats had arrived, but couldn't make the channel till dawn. So we anchored and then began one of the most hellish nights I've ever known. The wind freshened and we were tossed about like corks. Water slopped in every few minutes, and sleep, only made possible by sheer exhaustion, was further broken by the boatmen yelling spasmodically to each other, and the almost continuous grouching of the man in charge of No. 2 boat: "Why the hell this!" and "Why the hell that!" and "I don't see why we couldn't have done this!" etc., etc., *ad nauseam*, till a fresh female voice from his own boat piped up: "For God's sake shut up! D'you think we arranged the tide just to annoy you? Don't be such a sissy and go to sleep." The other boats cheered lustily and the moaning ceased.

#### *Wednesday, 18th February*

The long hours till daylight passed, a mixture of heaving sleep and cursing wake, as we tossed about, rolling on the boards, and getting cold dollops of wave down our necks.

### *Singapore to Colombo*

However, eventually it became light enough to see some sort of coastline ahead and a double row of stakes marking the channel in. We again raised anchor and set off down the channel, and by sun-up had reached the jetty of Kuala Raja, a small port on the north-east of Singkep Island. Here we disembarked and, climbing on to the jetty, stood shivering in the sun. The village consisted (on the side of the stream on which we landed) of a wide street with about three bamboo houses on either side of it, the police station being housed in the first one on the left. But in the street were a lorry and a motor car, which had been sent down from Dabo at the telephoned request of the local police when they sighted us at dawn. Into these conveyances we packed as many of our party as we could and sat down to await further transport. The police, a native force of a few men, in the charge of a European Dutch officer, made us welcome in their hut and brewed some coffee for us, apologizing for the lack of milk and sugar. The Hollander spoke no English, but we conversed as well as possible in Malay, and from him I discovered that all the European population of Dabo, except the Contrôleur, had already left, that a lot of survivors from wrecks had arrived, that Singapore had fallen, and that the Japs had landed in Java and Sumatra and were expected among the islands at any time. Depressing enough in all conscience, but, I tried to console myself, probably largely rumour. Was there any cable or wireless station at Dabo? Oh yes, but it had been put out of action some days ago.

Soon a mosquito bus turned up and the rest of us piled aboard and set off. Dabo lies about 16 miles south from Kuala Raja, and the scenery, if one could have appreciated it, was lovely. I kept on looking for signs of normal life going on in the villages and tin-mining camps we passed, but all looked

### *Singapore to Colombo*

deserted, and my heart sank. Was this Eldorado, too, to be just a mirage?

We reached Dabo, which at first sight seemed to be just a cross road with a few houses—all empty—and drew up at the Magistrate's Court. Here the Contrôleur met us and immediately I told him of the plight of those at Pulan Medang and Senajang. He said already he was arranging to despatch what supplies he could, as he'd already heard from another European who was there and had brought a launch from Singapore. He must have overtaken us during the night and run straight to Dabo instead of making for Kuala Raja. This man, Kingswood, and I talked for a while on the situation which, he said, couldn't be blacker. On our prospects of getting away anywhere, he had little to say except "Most people think it could be done by a dash from here to Sumatra up the Indragiri River as far as Rengat, then by road to Fort de Keock, and so on to Padang." This conveyed nothing to me, as I'd no idea whereabouts we were on the map, or in what relation we lay to Java, Sumatra, Ceylon or Singapore, and he further said that the trip might be possible but there was no means of getting to Sumatra. There was a small steamer in the dock, but it was well aground, and he didn't think it possible to get her off, and there was, of course, no service of any sort between the islands since Japan had got control of the seas. It was hard to believe that we were stuck. Looking around at this peaceful little place, with its Dutch civilization on it, the posters on the court wall urging young men to join the Dutch Navy and the Air Force, war seemed miles away.

The male survivors of wrecks were being accommodated in the Club, so I proceeded up there and reported myself. A Major in charge explained the running of the Mess—those who had any money paid what they could, and those who

### *Singapore to Colombo*

hadn't, didn't. Certain rations were sent every day from the Contrôleur (with whom the women were staying), and these were cooked together with what was privately contributed (if anything) and served as the main meal at about noon. I was looking forward to noon by now, being exceedingly hungry, but it was only by then about 10 o'clock.

The Major then pointed out that most of the available accommodation at the Club was full, we'd better move into an empty house next door, and all survivors from the *Kuala* would be housed there, too.

We went across to the bungalow and found it completely unfurnished and bare. This looked like another night on bare boards, so I went around on a scrounge to see if I could find anything, particularly to soften the lot of Major Scobel Nicholson, whose hands were hurting him badly and making it impossible for him to do anything for himself.

The next door house, a similar little bungalow, was, I discovered, uninhabited but fully furnished. A young Malay came along, and it transpired he was the caretaker, so after a little persuasion we got him to open the place for us and we—that is, J. B. Ross, Sir John Bagnall, J. B. Grant, Watson, Major Scobel Nicholson and I—moved in. The sleeping accommodation we worked out as follows: Sir John had the cook's room near the kitchen with wooden plank bed and mattress (his own choice), Major Nicholson on a divan bed in the sitting-room, Grant and Watson in a double bed in the bedroom, and Ross and I on two mattresses from two cots on the floor of the dressing-room. 'Mat, the Malay, proved more than helpful. He went off to his kampong and came back in an hour or so with a couple of hens and a dozen eggs, and we told him to bring one hen and twelve eggs every morning. We asked about bread, and he said he might be able to manage

### *Singapore to Colombo*

something in the mornings, but, of course, most of the shopkeepers had shut up shop and removed their stores and themselves to their kampongs when the troops retreated through, so ill-mannered and undisciplined were they.

We went up to the Club for our midday meal, which consisted of a spoonful of rice, a spoonful of boiled greens, a small square of meat, and a small square of bread. Tasted like nectar, and my plate for once needed no washing.

In the afternoon we all wandered down to the town to see what we could find in the way of stores, leaving the house to the care of 'Mat and Poli, a dog. Ross and Bagnall had seen the mess secretary and told him to count us out, and we would in future make our own arrangements for feeding, but asked for certain commodities in the way of salt and rice.

The — had certainly done their work bravely. Looting parties of ten and twelve had made short work of shops with only one friendly shopkeeper, and, with a few exceptions, everywhere was barred and bolted—small blame to the inhabitants.

However, we did find here and there odd tins of cane sugar, local coffee (not so good), Danish cream, a baker—closed, but rumoured to bake at night and sell between 6 and 6.30 a.m.—and beer! Also green vegetables, which we bought.

I went to the barber's for a shave, and while sitting in the chair was offered a box of 25 cigarettes for sale. I bought and asked if he'd any more. One more only; so I bought that, too. I felt he probably had hundreds of boxes somewhere, but once bitten by the—, twice shy of all white men. This proved to be the case, as having told the others of my find they went down, one by one, and each and all were told the same story—two boxes only left. However, that gave us enough to be able to smoke whenever we felt like it—a vast change from having had to ration to three a day.

### *Singapore to Colombo*

Grant and I cooked. For simplicity, we popped the hens and everything ('Mat had plucked and cleaned them) into a boiler and simmered it all together as a sort of stock-pot.

By evening, when it was ready, we dined like kings. Soup (from the stock pot), boiled eggs (also from the stock pot), chicken and vegetables, beer and coffee, and we sank, as darkness fell, on to our mattresses with a sigh of content and slept till dawn.

#### *Thursday, 19th February*

I got up around 6 o'clock and pottered into the kitchen, lit the fire, boiled the kettle, and took everyone a cup of tea to their bedsides. My own cup I took out to the verandah and sat with it and a cigarette in the rays of the rising sun, and felt almost happy. I was getting a little worried about not being able to communicate with any of the family, but there was nothing I could do about it, anyway.

On going back to the kitchen to wash up the cups I saw 'Mat coming, followed as usual by Poli. He had brought the fowl and eggs, as requested, and also six young rolls and a newly-baked loaf of bread. So breakfast lacked nothing, and after we'd bathed we sat down to coffee and cream, eggs, rolls and tinned butter and tinned jam, which we'd discovered in the village.

After breakfast we had a ways and means committee. My money was finished with the \$10 I'd given 'Mat to get the eggs, hens and morning rolls with, and no one seemed to have any at all except Grant, who said he thought he'd got enough to keep us all going for a while, but it was all still a bit damp. He and I went to the kitchen and started to pull out wads of clammy paper from his pocket, which we put in a pan on the fire. That morning between us we cooked and

### *Singapore to Colombo*

dried just over \$5,000. As Grant said, it was no use to him there, so we might as well use it to live on, and if we ever got out we could pay him back. We accepted his offer—there was nothing else to do—and settled a wage on 'Mat for shopping, helping generally with the house work, and for doing our laundry. 'Mat then produced a singlet and a pair of white running shorts which his master had given him before he left, but which were too big for him, so he gave them to me—thus giving me a change of clothes and a sense of propriety.

Lunch followed on the same lines as dinner the previous night.

A further visit down into the village in the afternoon to get some more fresh greenstuff. While there, came a shout of "Kapel terbang," followed by the distant noise of aircraft. Immediately every shop or house that had been opened was slammed shut, barred and bolted, and the streets were empty. Nicholson and I slipped into a narrow passageway between two houses and Grant shot into a drain. The planes, nine of them, flew low over the town, but didn't stop, and soon their noise had died away. Apparently they considered that the bombing of the workshops beside the harbour four days ago was sufficient—it was, too, judging by the mess they made of them. Within a few more minutes the local population appeared by ones and twos, and life resumed as normal an aspect as before.

After dinner that night we sat on the slope outside the bungalow smoking in the moonlight, and we were almost content. Upmost in our minds was a desire to communicate with people at home, and we all had personal worries about friends and relatives as to whose whereabouts and safety we knew nothing, but it was very peaceful sitting there with the

### *Singapore to Colombo*

huge yellow tropic moon shining serenely from the sky, and the knowledge that ahead was a mattress to sleep on.

*Friday, 20th February*

Sir John came back from the Club this morning with the news that the Contrôleur now wanted all civilian evacuees to move up the hill to the Administrator's house. (Administrator of the Singkep Tin Mines in peace-time.) This was a large and beautiful bungalow up near the hospital, and up till now had been occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Smart (General Manager, F.M.S. Railways) and one or two high M.C.S. officials and their wives. We were sorry to hear about this, for we'd become attached to our little house—and particularly to our style of living and eating in it!—but it couldn't be helped. We decided, however, to keep on 'Mat to bring us up rolls every morning, and to do our laundering.

We had a colossal lunch before returning to the "Mess rations," using up thereby all our stores—chicken soup (more chicken than soup and eaten with the fingers), corned beef kedgeree (which I made—and most successful, too!), with green peas and fruit salad and coffee.

After lunch, we started off up the almost perpendicular road to the Administrator's bungalow, carrying our luggage. Sir John, who was wearing a shirt, no collar, but with a tie and slacks, just stuffed his belongings into his shirt, while I wrapped mine into a sort of Dick Whittington bundle in my sarong; J. B. Ross, who had managed to get some black canvas boots to fit him, put his in his pockets and off we went.

There was, of course, not nearly enough room for us all, so we staked out places for ourselves on the concrete verandah and left our bundles.

By and by the Contrôleur turned up and asked six of us



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to be pall bearers to Kleinman of Queen's Tennis Club, who had died that morning in hospital, and Grant and I volunteered to meet the cortège at the hospital at 4.30 p.m.

Just then I spotted Avery of the P.W.D. disappearing into the kitchen, so going after him we chatted a while. It transpired he'd also been there two days and was working as a cook to the mess. His immediate task was beheading and gutting over 300 small fish—about the size of sardines—so I borrowed a knife and filled in time till the funeral in helping him. He told me that Morgan and Mitford were also there, having left Pompong as advance party making for Tanjong Daboh in Sumatra at the mouth of the Indiagiri, and being misled by the similarity of names, had turned up here in Daboh Singkep.

At four-thirty, Grant and I went to the hospital and helped carry Kleinman's body wrapped in bamboo matting on a stretcher to the graveside. Here the Contrôleur gave a very simple, kind, impromptu service, and we buried him. On return to the Administrator's bungalow we found that J. B. Ross had been talking with Mr. and Mrs. Smart, who, by virtue of longest residence, were in charge of the mess, and that Grant, Morgan and I had been co-opted into becoming the buying committee.

This at least gave us something to do, and entailed going down into town at 6.30 a.m. for bread, about 10.30 a.m. for greens and to order fish, and about 2.30 p.m. to collect the fish.

Supper that evening consisted of a spoonful of rice and three of the fish which I'd helped to gut, and a half cup of coffee.

That night was a sad contrast to the two previous ones, for the concrete verandah was not nearly so sympathetic as the cot mattress, small though that had been. I was so uncomfortable eventually that I got up and strolled about the garden

### *Singapore to Colombo*

in the moonlight with a cigarette, and finally pulled my bundle off the verandah and lay on the grass. Let the dew do what it would, it was a little softer than concrete on the lawn.

#### *Saturday, 21st February*

About 6.15 in the morning Morgan and I went down to the village to collect the sixty rolls which we had ordered the night before—and then bought two more, which we ate there and then. My, they were good!

On the way home up the hill we discussed our chances of getting away. Morgan said the only way out was via Sumatra—up the Indiagiri as far as possible, and thence by any means possible across to Padang, and that the best means of getting to Sumatra was with the army or navy, many of whom, officers and men, were at the Club. Morgan had a friend there, and was going to talk to him later.

Grant and I went down for the morning shopping visiting the Fish Market first. Here we asked what time the fishing fleet would be due in, and, on being told that it was expected about 2 o'clock, we went on searching for enough greens to feed the 60 odd people. Eventually from here and there we bought about forty bundles of what looked like a cross between lettuce and spinach, and which boiled into a solid dark green slab tasting of nothing much. It was, however, fresh, and that was the main point. Then from a man sitting on the pavement we purchased four pineapples, and from a shop which had newly re-opened, two large packets of tea. Festooned with these packages we started off up the hill again. My Chinese sandals of wood were far from being ideal footwear, as I kept slipping backwards out of them, or nearly turning my ankle owing to the thickness of the sole. On the way up the hill we overtook a man pushing a bicycle from the cross-bar of

### *Singapore to Colombo*

which was hung a sack. This was one of the local vendors on his way up to the bungalow, for since the shops had been largely closed, these bicycle vendors used to go round the houses producing an amazing assortment of merchandise from their sacks, ranging through live or dead hens, eggs, cigars, fruit, etc., and on this occasion the man produced boots—rubber-soled boots and canvas uppers, the sort that are used for basket ball, I think. Anyway he'd a pair that fitted me, so I bought them and put them on straight away. They were a vast improvement on the wooden shoes, although I was soon to find that when worn, particularly with bare feet, they generated a terrific heat.

On our return in the afternoon from the Fish Market, this time with an "Ikan Merah" about 2 ft. 6 in. long, and weighing by the time we reached the top of the hill about one ton, Morgan said he'd been to the Club, seen his friend, and thought that something might be arranged, but couldn't say what, and I went off to the kitchen to give Amery a hand to cope with the whale.

That evening Mitford went down to the Contrôleur's house to hear the wireless news, and came back with the ominous report that the Japs had captured Palembang in south Sumatra, and were attacking Medan in the north. In Java, the Dutch were retreating after fierce fighting. It was obvious, if we were to get across Sumatra to Padang on the far side, we'd have to move quickly, or the two Jap forces would have joined up and blocked the passage.

### *Sunday, 22nd February*

Another early morning trip to the village with Morgan, while he told me "they" were trying to get some of the soldiers and sailors off to get them back to the fighting again, and

### *Singapore to Colombo*

hoped we might perhaps wangle a crossing to Sumatra with them, after which we'd find our own way across to Padang, where, he said, he hoped to meet Nunn and the P.W.D. party again.

Paid a visit to the hospital in the morning. None of the wounded who had been brought from Pulan Medang and Senajang seemed any the worse for the delay before getting proper treatment, except old Wainwright, who had been injured on the dockside at Singapore and got a large lump of shrapnel in his backside. He, judging by the smell near his bed, was badly gangrened. Green, who had been hit in the legs, was very cheerful, and said his were only flesh wounds, but still made walking impossible owing to stiffness. He complained of hunger like all of us (since we had had to stop catering for ourselves), and asked me to bring him some food of any description, and some pencils, when next I went down to the village.

Around 2 o'clock I paid another visit down the hill to the Market, but the fish wasn't in, so I wandered on to the shore. Some soldiers were busy on the long jetty which ran out to sea, trundling barrels of what looked like stores to the far end. I gathered from the activity that Morgan's story of an attempt to get some of the forces off must be true. That we'd get to Sumatra I had little doubt, as for the past four days people had been disappearing, mostly the higher army officers, naval officers, and M.C.S. blokes.

I stripped down as far as my underpants and went in for a swim, which was heaven. White sandy beach, warm rippling water, sufficient breeze to keep the air cool, and bright sunlight flickering through the coconut palms.

I swam around and lazed in the shallows for about half an hour, and then came out and sat in the sun till my pants were

### *Singapore to Colombo*

dry. After dressing, I went back to the market and prodded the fish around. All completely unrecognizable as to species, so I just bought about 300 sprats, which I knew were edible and good.

Struggling up the hill I met Morgan, Amery and Mitford flying down. They told me to get a move on and get to the Club as soon as possible. The Navy had four junks at Kuala Raja, and we were to go with the troops to Sumatra as interpreters, as no one else spoke Malay.

I rushed back, tied my belongings up in my sarong, asked Ross to deliver the pencils and some bananas to Green, and shot off down hill again to the Club.

Here I joined up with the other three, and after some delay while lorries were loaded with troops, we climbed into a car and set off along the road I'd travelled full of rapidly shattering illusions four days ago.

On arrival at Kuala Raja, we went out on the little jetty, and sure enough there were the four junks anchored outside. The tide was running out fast, and embarkation would have to be swift if a passage of channel was to be made. A little dinghy was lying alongside the steps in the mud, so I went after it. One foot in my new canvas boots went in over the ankle to the cold, slimy muck, but we got the dinghy off, piled aboard, and set off down the channel to the sea.

The captains of the junks had been taken up to Dabo that morning, and were being bribed by an extra opium ration to make the trip. The crews stayed aboard with an armed guard. We came alongside the first junk, the others being nearly fully loaded with troops by now, and found the four men guarding the boat on deck. The crew? Oh, they'd got bored and had gone ashore to Kuala Raja. They'd be back soon. My heart sank. The Chinese are not a race that can be coerced and,

### *Singapore to Colombo*

although it might have been possible to have made an arrangement with them to take the troops to the Indiagiri, once the captains were forcibly taken ashore, and a guard left on the ships, the crew would scent something fishy and beat it at the first opportunity. And this is what had happened. The guards, suspecting nothing more than a desire to stretch their legs on dry land, of course saw no reason to prevent them—besides, their job was to see that no one pinched or made off with the junks. Eventually about 80 soldiers came aboard, but no rations materialized, nor was there any officer in charge of the flotilla. Around dusk the captains came off with an officer, the latter giving orders to sail immediately! The captain of our junk, when he discovered his crew had gone, was furious. He chattered and gibbered and finally disappeared down the hatch like a pantomime demon, presumably to smoke his bribe before it was taken from him. He obviously could not sail his junk single-handed, so what else was there for him to do? After two pipes he popped up on deck again, still very cross, cursed everyone and everything, and disappeared below. These sudden materializations occurred for some time at lengthening intervals until he passed out.

Of the three remaining junks, all had rations, but only one had a crew. They therefore rather jauntily hoisted sail, raised the anchor and waved good-bye. At the end of half an hour they were still alongside, and it was obvious they would not be leaving until the tide rose again and lifted them off the bottom. Exhaustion and opium combined during the night, and they were still with us the next morning. It being impossible for us to get off that night, we lay on deck as comfortably as possible (which was damned uncomfortably), and as straight as other bodies and the thousand innumerable gadgets on deck allowed.

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*Monday, 23rd February*

Dawn found all four junks still at anchor with little hope of getting away. The crews, scattered and mingled with the thousands of tin-miners on the island, would be well nigh impossible to find—and, besides, we'd no rations aboard.

Upon consultation, during which the captain popped up again, climbed into the row-boat that had brought him off yesterday evening, and disappeared shorewards, never to be seen again, we hailed a passing sampan which came alongside. Into this we jumped and went ashore, too, determined to try our luck with the villagers to rent, hire, borrow or steal some craft capable of making the trip. We felt we had no time to waste if we wanted to make Padang, and we had no means of telling the rate of the Japanese advance, converging on the waist of Sumatra, which waist we wanted to cross.

Mitford, who loved making these kind of bargaining arrangements, immediately plunged into conversation with the headman and got nowhere. "He's holding out on us," said Mitford, and shot into the fray again.

The end house on the right-hand side of the road functioned as the village store, and sold vegetables (when there were any, but which there were not at the moment), coconuts, and dried fish. It was owned by one Rahmin, a thin, ascetic-looking Malay, his wife, five children, and his mother-in-law, a blasé old madam. We wandered up here and bought some coconuts, which we devoured hungrily for yesterday's lunch had long since ceased to satisfy. There we mentioned that we wanted to get to Padang. "Nothing easier," declared old Madam. "I, too, wish to return to my house in Padang. I have been visiting my daughter, but life in these islands I find very boring. There is nothing to do." From a bead-bag slung on her wrist she produced the materials for making betel chew, and added,

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"My son-in-law will take us in his boat. We will go this afternoon."

This was staggering—Malays just don't move about like that on sudden impulse. Rahmin, on being approached, agreed in a bored way that he had a boat and could take us. Could we leave right away? Well, no, the tide was wrong, we'd have to wait till the evening—when, as we well knew, the tide would be worse. This we pointed out, but he pooh-poohed it, and said his boat would manage. We all felt suspicious at the ease with which it had been fixed, Mitford saying that he didn't want to take us, and certainly Rahmin couldn't have sounded less enthusiastic. However, we said we'd like him to get his boat provisioned and watered so as to be ready, but he countered that by saying he'd have to get a letter from the headman before we could go to Sumatra. This custom seems to be general around the islands, and acts as an introduction if the visitor is a stranger to the district he goes to. It acts really as a sort of passport and identification card.

So we pushed Rahmin out and told him to go and get his letter, and went to see how the junks were faring. One had gone, a second had hoisted sail. They were apparently going to sail without crews.

Around midday Mrs. Rahmin asked if we'd like some food? A smell of cooking had been coming from the back of the house for some time, and by now we'd all developed "Bisto Kid" expressions. She then produced some boiled rice, eggs fried in coconut oil, and dried fish.

After lunch Rahmin returned looking rather pleased, and said the headman wouldn't give him a letter. Why not? Well—he wasn't ready to go. That was no reply to our question, which we repeated, and he said he'd maybe get a letter the next day.



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We argued, cajoled, threatened, all to no avail. He had wanted \$75 apiece (Morgan luckily had about \$600 with him) to take us, so we showed him the money and offered \$100 apiece. All right, he'd take us, but we would have to wait till dawn before we left. More than that we couldn't get him to agree to, so we had to be content.

A car arrived from Dabo with provisions for the fourth junk, and orders for those remaining to sail at once with or without crews. However, the tide was falling again, and there would be little hope of them getting off before 3 a.m., so we decided to stick by our arrangement with Rahmin.

And so the day slowly passed, with Mitford playing Cassandra and foretelling further delays before getting away with Rahmin. We all felt inclined to agree, but just hoped for the best.

The family said we'd be welcome to sleep in their front room (the shop), and clearing away coconuts and fish, produced from somewhere a mattress. This we placed on the floor, and all four of us lay across it, using our bundles as pillows and letting our legs lie on the boards, and to the smell of slightly fermented coconut and very dried fish we one by one dropped off.

#### *Tuesday, 24th February*

At some time during the night I was awakened by someone coming in the door and going through to the back room. Thereafter voices, Rahmin's and another man's, droning on and on, and finally I dropped off to sleep again.

Again, while it was still dark, I was wakened by the door squeaking as it closed, and realizing the voices had stopped, presumed it was Rahmin's visitor departing.

I was finally wakened by dawn's justifying its other name

### *Singapore to Colombo*

of cock crow, and was just about to get up when the door opened and Rahmin came in. He went straight through to the back room and began to talk to the women in an undertone. I got up and went outside, where it was already light although the sun was not yet up. The mists were rising from the creek, but from the jetty I could see that the junks had gone, although a most curious craft had anchored in the bay. It looked like a barge, but had an enormous lump or snout in front, but was too far away to distinguish clearly.

Back to the shop as the sun came up to discover Mrs. Rahmin brewing coffee, and pandemonium raging between Mitford, Rahmin and the old woman. It transpired that Rahmin had announced that he couldn't take us that day after all. He had a cargo coming in for his shop, and had to wait to see it arrive. However, after a lot of talk, Rahmin informed us that the cargo was coming from the Indiagiri by sailing boat, and that the owner of the sailing boat would be returning directly he had unloaded. Would he take us? "Certainly," said Rahmin. "Why not?" When was the cargo due in Kuala Raja? That morning. The boat had arrived during the night, and the owner was already ashore sleeping. When he was rested he would bring in his boat, unload, and off we could go. And that is what we did, although it was four o'clock in the afternoon before we got away and slipped down the channel to the sea. Once in the bay, we anchored again, and on asking the reason for the delay, Abdul, the captain, said he had some friends to meet. Friends? We looked round blankly. The shore was at least a mile away, and the only thing near us was that curious craft I'd seen in the morning, and which turned out to be an invasion barge brought over from Singapore by a naval and army officer. (These two had come ashore in the morning with Ross and O'Grady and had gone through

### *Singapore to Colombo*

up to Dabo, leaving the barge at anchor. Where the two officers contacted Ross and O'Grady, I never discovered.)

However, Abdul lowered himself into the water without a word. "The man's mad," said we, but then realized that Abdul, although only up to his waist in water, was standing on the bottom. Thence he began to wade inshore, and soon three black specks appeared on land. They waited until Abdul reached dry land, and then, putting their tin trunks and baggage on their heads, started to wade back to the boat.

This boat was rather more superior to those in which we'd previously travelled, and had some planking in the bow, which formed a foc'sle, in which the cooking apparatus was kept. The floor boards were more or less even, and aft was a "cabin" about 5 feet long, formed by building a semi-circular roof in bamboo matting. Aft of the cabin was the raised portion where the helmsman sat. Total length of the boat from tip to tip, about 25 feet, and christened obviously *The Ark*.

Our fellow passengers arrived, climbing wetly in, three of them complete with tin or wooden trunks, and Abdul crawled in at the stern, gave the order to our crew to hoist sail, and off we were at last. We were now ten people, and it looked as though the nights might be crowded, but we all kept to our classes, ourselves in the saloon, and the steerage passengers in the well forward, and the captain and crew, when not doing anything else, either on the foc'sle (definitely *not* in the foc'sle, as this measured about 4 feet long and 3 feet wide at its widest) or aft at the tiller.

After dusk we came to an island, along the beach of which were some native houses. This was Abdul's village, and we nosed in to within a few feet of the shore, and everyone except one of the crew and myself jumped ashore. Abdul had invited them for food, but I had developed a splitting headache, so

### *Singapore to Colombo*

decided to forego supper. The "crew" then removed *The Ark* from the breakers and anchored out. It was distinctly choppy, but I was past caring, and lay down in the cabin with a whirling head.

Later we were hailed, and I woke up to find my headache gone and the others wanting to come to bed. The crew sailed us in again, and while the passengers fell aboard, having eaten curried no-one-knew-what (but suspected red-hot coals), we unloaded our ballast, consisting of a pile of ruddy great rocks, and loaded up with water and provisions—and then the great Captain Abdul went back to bed muttering that morning would be time enough.

There followed a hellish night. No one had room enough to lie down in, and when it started to pour with rain the steerage passengers crawled into the cabin, too, bringing as much of their luggage as they could.

### *Wednesday, 25th February*

As soon as the first pale streak of dawn showed we started yelling for Abdul, and he came out of his hut looking a little disgruntled. However, he came aboard, and as the sun rose we were on our way. We had to sail due west to reach the Indiagiri, and Abdul, who was the chattiest man about himself I have ever met, said with luck we should be in Indiagiri Kuala (estuary) by dark.

Our course took us through the outlying islands of the Rhio Archipelago, and finally passing between two of them came out into the open waters for the first time.

The breeze held and the morning was uneventful except for a reconnaissance plane, which kept us diving for the saloon as it passed up and down the Straits at about three-quarter hour intervals. Also, one of the steerage passengers was sick,

### *Singapore to Colombo*

but this consisted merely of an odd groan, and he covered himself completely from head to foot in his sarong and lay as motionless as *The Ark's* movement allowed.

Ahead of us we sighted another sailing boat, white sail and hull which, Abdul said, looked like Rahmin's, and within an hour or two we had overhauled it. It was Rahmin's boat, with Rahmin at the tiller. We gave it a yell as we passed, and a European suddenly popped up, shook his fist at us, and as suddenly disappeared. We all felt rather hurt. It was not the kind of answer we expected, and we felt rather hurt as Stanley would have felt if Livingstone had slapped his face instead of shaking his hand.

However, we forged ahead, with Abdul anxiously examining the bank of black cloud forming to the east. This showed we might expect a Sumatra, one of those sudden squalls so common in this part of the world, but expressed his confidence in his ship.

And then we saw land, Tanjong Datch, as a slim grey sliver above the horizon. On we sailed till we were alongside the point, but several miles from shore, and we followed parallel with the shore, making for the Kuala. Rahmin's boat by this time was just a mere white dot behind us, but the gathering Sumatra was coming closer. Ahead of us we saw a large column of smoke. We had seen all too many similar columns in the past few weeks after air raids, and wondered if the Japs had already reached the Indiagiri. Abdul told us it was a fire in a garden, but it was much too great a volume of smoke for a bonfire.

Then the rain began, and the squall lifted our stern and off we went with a whizz. The crew shortened sail (not nearly enough in my estimation, but supposed Abdul knew what he was doing) and at first it was rather exhilarating. Rahmin's

### *Singapore to Colombo*

boat had disappeared, and Abdul remarked rather ghoulishly that he'd probably sunk, and proceeded to regale us with a story of how Rahmin had run his boat on the rocks and smashed it up during his last trip.

The storm showed no signs of abating, and although we could see land we seemed to get no nearer (which was not surprising, as we were following parallel with it). But out of the rain and waves would loom enormous thalons or fishing stakes with houses on them, and, as we passed more and more of those with no signs of getting anywhere, I got fed up with the rain, wet, cold and roughness and with the waves slopping in every few minutes. However, that didn't help any, and it wasn't till near sunset that the storm abated and the wind died down almost completely. Around dusk the wind disappeared just as we sighted Priggi Rajah, the first town at the mouth of the river, and we had to use the sweeps to get in.

Coming alongside the jetty, we saw the four junks which had made the crossing safely from Kuala Raja, but we subsequently heard that it had been far from comfortable. We disembarked and gladly stretched our legs on the jetty while waiting for the headman to turn up. He came in just a few minutes, and led us off along a narrow board walk skirting the river until we came to a restaurant. We were, by now, very tired, particularly our sea-sick steerage passenger who, however, revived sufficiently to eat two enormous plates of rice. The high spot of this meal was the coffee, which had both milk and sugar, a luxury to which we had by now grown unaccustomed.

Abdul agreed to go on as far as possible that night up river, so after our meal we wasted no time and embarked right away. There was a slight breeze which freshened somewhat and brought rain, and we made fairly good progress towards

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Tembilahan until midnight, when the wind dropped, and we tied up for the night.

*Thursday, 26th February*

Dawn found us using the sweeps and crawling along up-stream. Here the scenery was very dull, the river being lined on both sides by mangrove swamps, and each bend revealing only another long drab stretch. About six o'clock Abdul started his usual cry of "Lagi satu jam" (only an hour more), but it was 10.30 a.m. before we sighted Tembilahan clustering on the left bank of the river, and 11.15 before we tied up. Here we paid off the boat and crew, and said good-bye to our fellow passengers. Our first concern was breakfast, which we had in a Tamil coffee shop, filling ourselves with curious heavy dough sweet cakes. Enquiry then elicited the information that there was an army organization somewhere in the town, and this we ran to earth in a bungalow. Some British army and navy officers were sitting around drinking beer, but one came out and told us to report at the jetty about 5 o'clock that evening, when they hoped some conveyance or other would be going up-river to Rengat—and went back to his beer. Next we found a barber's shop, but the others decided to let their beards grow—a more fearsome collection of bristle would be hard to find—so I went in alone and was shaved. The feeling of well being given by a shave after a few days of abstinence was amazing.

We wandered around the little town, but there wasn't much to see save soldiers buying all the food they could lay their hands on—fruit, eggs, and one even had a live duck.

The hours till 5 o'clock crept round, all of us irritable at the heat and the delay. However, there seemed no way of getting on faster, or at all for that matter, unless we clung to

### *Singapore to Colombo*

the existing organization, and when the time finally arrived we went to the jetty and waited there with what seemed like thousands of British troops. After about an hour we sighted a launch with two or three barges in tow, and this was apparently the conveyance we had been waiting for.

Eventually the convoy came alongside and tied up. Off came Ross and O'Grady, whom we had last seen at Kuala Raja. It had been them in Rahmin's white boat which we had passed crossing over to Sumatra. They'd shaken their fists at us to keep us away, as they didn't want the reconnaissance plane to see two boats so close together. They said they'd had a terrible trip when the Sumatra blew up, and gave up all hope of getting across on several occasions.

We started to get aboard the barge, which was swarming inside and out with troops, and told Ross and O'Grady to come along with us, as there was no saying when the next chance to get up river would come. Ross joined us, but O'Grady said no, he was too tired and must get some sleep. We told him, without much obvious truth, that he could sleep in the barge, but he said it was too crowded to lie down in (it was), and he was staying overnight at Tembilahan. How far he eventually got I do not know, but I haven't seen him since.

We went aboard. The barge was one of those big hollow lighters such as can be seen on any English river or canal, but had some planks strewn across its breadth here and there, serving as a very dangerous top deck. We descended into the bowels, and tried to and eventually discovered a few square inches into which we squeezed ourselves. There was just enough room to sit down in, with legs drawn up underneath, and in this space we spent one of the longest and most uncomfortable nights I've ever had. I lay down sometimes (but



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clasping my knees on my stomach as my back was taking up all the available room) till the cramped position became unbearable, and then sat up again till I couldn't stand that any longer. It was pitch dark inside, so every move was fraught with danger to someone else's face, and altogether it was only the fact that we were moving towards some destination or other that kept us sane.

#### *Friday, 27th February*

As soon as it became slightly light Avery, with the agility of a cat, swarmed up one of the supports and went through a space between two planks on to the upper "deck." He called through that there was room for us, so gingerly we disentangled our bundles and ourselves and, by pushing and pulling, arrived in the fresh air. We perched precariously on one of the planks and watched the river banks slowly flow past. Our tug was doing splendidly (it was an ex-Japanese fishing boat), and considering the current against us, we were making good time, but the trip seemed endless—just mile after mile of jungle-clad banks, and occasionally a small clearing with a group of native huts.

We breakfasted—the five of us and three nearby soldiers—off a tin of corned beef which we discovered was much more palatable if left in the sun for a while, till some of the fatty parts melted and made gravy.

Around 10 a.m. we came on a launch tied up alongside the bank, and then another, and then two or three more, and realized that they had all come from Singapore and had been abandoned or had broken down. The people in them must have blessed their luck, for the breakdowns might have occurred anywhere in the desolate stretches of the river instead of, as they had, just around the corner from Rengat. And so

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we reached Rengat, which I had first heard of from Kingswood at Dabo over a week ago, and which had then seemed as easy to reach as Paradise—and just as tempting.

Actually, it wasn't much to look at—a little town lying on the river bank, but looking as though life in it was normal and undisturbed, and we could see a few cars and some motor buses and lorries. While we were watching, the — in charge of our tug—unable or unwilling to take advice, like all his fellow countrymen—turned his boat and, with the tow rope still attached to his stern and our bow, started to drift down alongside us. Consequently, as soon as he started his engine to check the way and manœuvre us into the bank, the tow rope wrapped itself inextricably around the propellor shaft—and that was another launch out of action. The barge had an anchor which was dropped, and there we were in midstream.

Then along came a launch and took off some wounded from the tug and started to give advice, which the — wouldn't listen to. Then Avery joined in—he never could resist a row, particularly when it was someone else's.

After about an hour in what was, by now, a very hot sun, our old friend the invasion barge from Kuala Raja chugged up and came alongside. We all transferred into it and set off for the landing stage where we tied up.

There was a rush for the shore which the officer in charge stemmed by announcing: "You can all go ashore if you want to, but you're better off where you are." He then explained that although there was a road from Rengat to Air Molek, and the West, a bridge was down 30 miles out of Rengat and no through traffic was possible. He was, he said, taking his barge up river past where the bridge was broken, and would land us on the far side.

Despite the fact that several went ashore, we were still

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packed like sardines in the well of the barge. Climbing up the side, however, we discovered that a ledge, about 15 inches wide, ran around the outside of the barge some 2 feet above the water. We crawled over the gunwale and sat along this ledge, our feet nearly in the river, and on it we stayed till evening. When we were tired of sitting, we gingerly arose into a standing position, and when tired of that we sat down again.

At Rengat we picked up a string of barges and lighters crammed with soldiers mostly, and off we set about mid-day. Rations were handed out, Avery, Morgan, Mitford, Ross and I sharing a tin of what I think was called "Concentrated Lamb Stew." It consisted, or seemed to consist, largely of mashed potatoes, which we dug out with our fingers turn and turn about.

We spent most of the afternoon trying to calculate our speed, and thereby work out how long it would take to cover 30 miles. However, the trip, like every one we made on the river, seemed endless, always with the hope that destination might be around the next bend, which when passed merely revealed another loathsome stretch.

About 5 o'clock it began to rain, so we stood up and tucked our heads under a tarpaulin to try and keep as dry as possible. About half an hour we were getting cramped and stiff owing to those in the rear trying to push up under cover, and it seemed to me as though my left arm was taking the full strain against a bulkhead, but the rain kept on and on, nor showed signs of clearing.

Darkness fell, and shortly afterwards we heard the engines slow down and, looking out, discovered we were coming alongside a jetty. This was Air Molek, which we had thought was still miles away.

Thankfully we jumped ashore, and within two minutes were

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soaked through clothes, bundles and everything. What a wasted effort squeezing under the tarpaulin had been.

In the wet darkness we splashed our way up the river bank and along a road at the top running parallel with the river. About a quarter of a mile on the road swung away from the river and we saw lights through the trees.

This was the "Rest Camp"—a rubber factory which had been turned into a clearing house for refugees, and a control point to prevent Sawah Leunto and Padang from becoming flooded out.

Cold, wet and, as usual, hungry, we stood around until the Commandant came over and we were taken off to a go-down. Here were sheets and sheets of crepe rubber which we were to utilize as bedclothes and mattresses. The five of us took up position in a corner, and then went back to the warm go-down for supper. We queued up at the tail of about 200 people, each of us clasping two latex jars about the size of an ordinary breakfast cup. Those in front of the queue, when their turn came, dashed out of the door across a yard in the pouring rain to the shed where the cookhouse was, and came back inside again with one cupful of soup and one full of tea. However, by the time the queue was half-way finished, the menu of soup and tea was changed to soup or tea.

Having spent the day on as much corned beef and, later, potatoes as could be hooked up in two dips of two fingers into their respective tins, I could have finished a soup-tureen easily, and the portions we got served merely to aggravate rather than dispel hunger.

And so to bed—and what a night! I undressed and hung my soaking clothes at a window in the (vain) hope that they would dry, and having nothing in my bundle that was also not soaking, I wrapped my towel around my waist and got down on to the "bed" of rubber sheets. The smell wasn't all

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one could have wished for, but the mosquitoes soon drove all other worries away. I have seen many mosquitoes in my time, but never such enormous ones, or in such droves. They were flying in thick clouds around one's exposed parts with a high-pitched hum like a dynamo, and when they landed you could feel them touch down, and only sheer exhaustion enabled any of us to sleep at all.

#### *Saturday, 28th February*

Waking at intervals through the night, from all over the go-down came the noise of slapping as the others waged ceaseless war against mosquitoes, and the rain thundered on the iron roof.

Towards dawn I fell into a good sound sleep, to be wakened by an officer coming in and ordering the leaders of the various groups to report to the Commandant in half an hour's time. Morgan, being the senior one of us, we elected him to go, and Mitford went along, too, for good measure. The rest of us trooped over to the main go-down, where were great tiled tanks for washing rubber, filled with cold water for those who wanted a bath. The rain had stopped, but it was damp and cold and misty still, and my clothes were still sopping, so the appeal of a bath was not as strong as it otherwise might have been. However, I found a tap on a 6-inch pipe and, stripping, got under that. The force of water was terrific but refreshing, and I soon dried a little on my damp towel and pulled on my soggy shirt and shorts. Then Morgan and Avery came back and said the P.W.D. had sent an S.O.S. from Padang to expedite any members who might turn up at Air Molek, and we were to leave in the first batch that morning. This was marvellous news, and hunger, cold, and wet clothes didn't seem to matter any more.

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We then queued up again for breakfast, which consisted of another latex cupful of soup. This we drank sitting in the sun, whose rays had penetrated the clouds and mist, and felt like new men.

After what seemed like hours (but really about 9 o'clock) we were called and packed into a bus with some soldiers who were also being expedited for some reason. Just before we left, however, the bus driver said he was overloaded and two passengers must get out. The officer in charge of transport asked two P.W.D. members to descend and go in the next bus, which would leave in half an hour. Ross and Mitford being nearest the door, did so, and we drove off saying we'd meet them at Sawah Leunto, our destination for that night, and also the railhead.

All went well for about an hour, when we suddenly had a puncture and had to stop. This, however, was fixed, not by putting on a spare wheel or anything simple like that, but by putting in a new inner tube. All the time we expected the bus behind to roar ahead, but no traffic passed except an ambulance.

We were on our way again in half an hour or so, and the rain began a steady drizzle which kept off and on the whole day. Just after one o'clock we pulled up in a small town for food, and finding a Mohammedan restaurant, went in for curry. This, however, proved completely inedible to all except Avery, who could and did eat everything, so we went to a Tamil coffee-shop and filled up on the same heavy, sweet, doughy cakes that we had had in Tembilahan.

On our way again we shortly came to a river which had to be crossed by ferry, which consisted of a barge attached to a wheel running on a cable over the river. The motive power was the current of the river—all very ingenious and neat, but *why* it worked I couldn't see.

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Arrived on the other side, we started to climb. Up and up, round hairpin bends with the road hanging over great chasms, and the scenery becoming wilder and more lovely every moment and at every turn.

Our driver, on the level, had shown a fine disregard for corners and such, nor seemed to be troubled one whit by the steering wheel having no particular relation to the direction in which we travelled, and the realization that we would, some time or other, have to descend the other side of the mountains, up which we were noisily crawling, took a good deal of glamour away from the surroundings.

Descend we did, in the most frightening swoops and spirals. The road had been under rain all day and the surface was far from solid. We skidded, slipped and slithered, our off wheels seeming to run over nothing as we swung around chasms to the right. On, on, in a mad rush downwards for what seemed like hours, till I was frozen into a frightened coma and ceased to care what happened.

Nevertheless, we came back to more or less level ground again apparently undamaged, when it was borne in us that the bus engine was not pulling as well as it should, and the driver had to change into second or even bottom for the slightest rise. Finally, he got out and examined the near rear wheel, and told us the brake was biding. However, he got in again and started up, and we crawled along till we came to a junction where the road from Palembang joined that from Rengat (on which we had travelled). Here were a few houses and a police station, and the driver pulled up. It was by now dusk, and he said we could go no further until the brake had been seen to, intimating that there was some pretty stiff climbing ahead. We asked how far we were from Sawah Leunto, and were told, with true Eastern disregard for dis-

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tance, that we were about 100 km. (this by the driver), 180 km. (by a bystander), and 250 km. (by the police), none of which was very helpful.

Morgan, with the resourcefulness which he showed throughout, then approached the police. We were, he said, Government servants being rushed through to Padang on the orders of the Government (he didn't say, of course, whether he was referring to Dutch or British Governments). Our transport had broken down and, therefore, would the police put through a call to Sawah Leunto to send out fresh transport?

To our surprise, the police agreed and telephoned right away, coming in a few minutes to say that Sawah Leunto were considering what to do and would call back. I never really expected the authorities to send a car or bus a distance which might be anything from 60 to 150 miles to pick up some refugees, out of the thousands of refugees now swarming through Sumatra, but in about half an hour the telephone rang and said they were sending transport for us, and it should arrive about midnight!

Overjoyed, we went into the local coffee house and ordered food—rice with the inevitable curried lumps of ? and coffee without sugar or milk. After our meal, Morgan and I went for a stroll. The rain had stopped and the moon shone mistily through the clouds. A waterfall somewhere near, and the dim shapes of the few houses looking like chalets, somehow reminded me of Vallorbe in Switzerland.

We wandered up and down the road, and finally went to talk to the Police. We'd rather forgotten about the Japs until we asked for news, and were told that from latest reports the enemy, pushing north from Palembang, had reached a point between 25 and 30 miles from where we were! That brought them back with a shock, and we began to wonder then about



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those who were still behind us. There must have been at least 200 in Dabo when we left, with probably more arriving daily from the outer islands. O'Grady we'd left with plenty of company in Tembilahan, and somewhere near 500 were still at Air Molek when we passed through.

Our bus arrived on time, and once more we packed in and started. The new driver, a slick and imperturbable Chinese, had apparently a liking for speed, but for a while the road was good and fairly straight and level.

Then we rushed another mountain range, climbing higher and higher, while the mist and drizzle thickened, and the road surface deteriorated.

And then we came to the top and began the descent. Utter nightmare, which nobody enjoyed, although Avery put a brave face on and said, "I expect this driver could drive this road with his eyes shut," to which I replied snappishly, "I think he is." Round blind corners, hairpin bends, corkscrews, double turns, we whirled, until I again developed that protective coma and lost interest.

In a small market town we came to an enormous convoy of Dutch troops with lorries parked facing us, and completely blocking the road. Nobody seemed to be in charge, so Avery and I got out and went down the line playing traffic police, and gradually clearing a way for our bus till we were through and on the open road.

About 4 a.m. we reached Sawah Leunto and began to descend into the town. At what looked like an old mill set on the banks of a noisy little river running through the town, we set down our soldiers. The vast barn where they were to sleep looked pretty packed already, but the officer in charge said there was plenty of room. We climbed back into the bus and drove to the hotel. Inside we found a porter and, on

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enquiry about trains to Padang, he said one left in about half an hour, and the next at one o'clock midday.

We then asked rather hopelessly if he had any rooms, and nearly fainted when he said he had. Hotel bedroom! After nights on floors in native huts, nights spent on the boards at the bottom of small sailing boats, nights nowhere in particular on grass, or even that first memorable night two weeks ago on a heap of charcoal, a bedroom in an hotel just didn't seem possible.

We went upstairs and were shown two double rooms—Morgan and I in one, and Avery and an officer who'd come with us in the other. I lay on my bed and said, "Ooh, it bounces," and there and then we decided to wait for the mid-day train to-morrow—to-day rather—so as to give Mitford and Ross time to catch up.

Then, off with our clothes, and into bed and immediate sleep.

#### *Sunday, 1st March*

Awoke from a dreamless sleep about 8.30 feeling grand. It's marvellous what four hours of sound sleep can do. Morgan was already up, but I just rang and ordered coffee to be brought up, and this was brought and set out on the balcony. The morning was dry but felt like rain, and the hills surrounding the town were covered in mist. There was a strong feeling of being in Europe again, and Sawah Leunto, with its hills around it and noisy little river running through, somehow reminded me of an Easter I'd spent in Carlsbad. The church being opposite my balcony might have had something to do with the Easter feeling.

After coffee and a bath I dressed, the putting on again of my still slightly damp and more than slightly dirty shirt and

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shorts spoiling a lot of the effect of being back in civilization. Then we went up to the station and saw the stationmaster. He confirmed the train time—leave Sawah Leunto 12.50 p.m., arrive Padang 7.00 p.m. We asked the cost of first class tickets and discovered we (or at least Morgan) had enough to buy them, and so grandly “Three first class singles to Padang” said Morgan. “Gentlemen, I am desolated, but——” replied the stationmaster, and went on to explain that he could not issue any tickets to Padang without a warrant from the local Chief of Police.

Back to the hotel, where we asked for the address of the police, and at that minute had a stout Burgher in a tight green uniform pointed out to us, walking past on his way home from church with his small daughter. We decided to give him half an hour for breakfast before worrying him, and at the end of that time Morgan set off. We felt it better that only one should go, and Morgan’s clothes were the cleanest—besides, he had a pair of shoes or rather two shoes, as they didn’t match, and I had only my canvas and rubber boots, which were not wearing awfully well.

Shortly, he returned to say that the Police Chief had been charming, and would be along at the hotel later with our permits.

It had begun to pour, so as I was going out for a shave, anyway, I bought three oil-paper umbrellas for ourselves. Was shaved at the Micky Mouse Hairdressing Saloon by a very obliging Malay, but I couldn’t help feeling that although he’d probably watched people being shaved before, he’d never actually done it himself. Two of his pals came and sat down to watch—they were more appreciative on the whole than I was.

Back again to the hotel, where we started to play three-handed bridge, and were well on in the first game when the

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air-raid sirens went. We couldn't see any sign of shelters, although I suppose we could have gone out and followed some of the people running past, but it was raining, so we just went on with our bridge.

Not long after this we heard the sound of aeroplanes, but they were well above the clouds, and soon the noise died away. With the all-clear came the Chief of Police, a charming man, who didn't content himself with permission to buy tickets, but gave us free first-class vouchers for the journey. He explained that the restriction on travel was due to Padang's being packed full to the brim, and no one else was to be allowed there before some of those already there were taken off. And, as Sawah Leunto was also full for the same reason, no one was to be allowed to leave Air Molek before Padang was cleared. We told him of Ross and Mitford, and he said if they turned up he'd give them a voucher for the journey by the first available train. We also arranged to leave notes for the missing two at the hotel and also at the railway station, in case they thought of enquiring for us there, telling them to get in touch with the Chief of Police.

After a meal about midday—delicious stew, not even tinned!—we set off with our bundles under our umbrellas for the station. There the stationmaster, suitably impressed by the Police Chief's free pass, ushered us into a first class carriage, and immediately turned and shooed us out of it. This was a poser. Had he found a flaw in our passes? But it was quite simple really. On reaching the platform he hailed a porter, sent him inside the carriage with a brush and duster, and when the cleaning was complete, re-ushered us back with smiles. In view of our general filth and the condition of our clothes, we felt his gesture was a little uncalled for, but it was obviously meant well, and we thanked him prettily and parted friends.

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The journey was fun and the scenery really beautiful. When peace comes I mean to make the whole trip again leisurely and comfortably, for Sumatra looks a lovely country. We changed trains at Padang Panjang, joining the Fort de Keock-Padang express, which, despite travel restrictions, was packed. We had seats inside, but it became so hot that we went out on the gallery at the rear, which, our coach being the last, was also like an observation platform, and spent the rest of the time standing there.

Tired we were, but standing on the platform at the end was infinitely preferable to sitting in the stuffy coach. Besides, what did it matter now? We would be in Padang in a few hours, where there were hotels and shops, and where we could sleep and bath and shave and get haircuts and some clean clothes and eat decent meals decently served and plenty of them. I think we all rather enjoyed the exhausted feeling during this last lap, while the train rattled along through paddy fields. Everything looked more normal with workers in the fields, and once again war and all its accompanying discomforts seemed far away.

One thing we lacked by now was cigarettes—we had finished those we had managed to bring from Dabo, eked out by little Dutch or Sumatran cheroots; they had been absolutely unobtainable anywhere in Sumatra, and when a Sumatran cleanly and neatly dressed in clean shirt and collar and spotless white suit came out smoking and joined us on the platform, I watched every inch of his cigarette burn away until it was finished and he threw it away. I then *willed* him to take out his cigarette packet and offer it round. Eventually, after I had said over and over to myself, with my eyes glued on a bulge in his jacket pocket, "Cigarettes, cigarettes, for the love of Allah, cigarettes—please!" about a thousand times,

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it worked. At last he put his hand in his jacket pocket, took out the bulge (and it was a packet of cigarettes), helped himself, hesitated, while my subconscious willed hysterically, and handed them round! Utter bliss!

Eventually, as the sun was setting, we drew into Padang station and, getting down, we asked of a lieutenant-colonel, who seemed to be doing important things on the platform, if he knew where we could find Group Captain Nunn, the Director of Public Works. Did our hearts sink when he replied that Nunn had gone, and that if we had any sense we wouldn't even leave the station, as a train would go at 7.30 p.m. (in half an hour's time) to Padang docks, to connect with a ship which would take us out. We must have looked a little rebellious, for he added we could do as we liked, but as far as he knew it would be the last ship leaving for the outside. He then told us of a special train that had been arranged to leave Sawah Leunto as early as possible that afternoon, to bring as many as possible from the rail head and even beyond from Air Molek as could be crammed in, but warned us to take the 7.30, as if the "special" arrived in time before the ship sailed (and even that was doubtful) it would be packed full.

Bang went our dreams of resting in civilization for the umpteenth time, and really we should not have been so cast down about not being able to get clean clothes, cigarettes, even perhaps a drink, as we were, as it had happened at practically every place we had visited, with one small difference. Hitherto, we had always been told of the paradise the next place was, to find it was far from it on arrival. Here it was paradise, but the Angel of God in the guise of a lieutenant-colonel was driving us from it with the flaming sword of facts and threats of being left behind.

So we just sat down on our bundles and moped. No

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cigarettes because the station sold none, and the shops were about a quarter of an hour away, and a longing (by no means sudden, but strenuously suppressed until nearing Padang, where I had thought gratification would be possible) for a drink which could only be satisfied by fruit juice syrup. Hell, hell, hell! And then suddenly Pineapple Johnson, who had been my next-door neighbour while I was in Johore, was helped into the station by an orderly. He had been wounded in the feet, and had just come out of hospital to catch the train. In his bag, he had, if anyone wanted a drink, a bottle of sherry and also some cigarettes! Just then the train pulled in, so we helped him aboard, and then turned our attention to his bag. We'd no corkscrew, but that was a small matter—we pushed the cork in. We finished that bottle in the quarter of an hour the trip to the docks took, between the four of us. It's not a way I can recommend to drink sherry, but it was like nectar to us, and we were all a bit tiddily as we started to walk along the quayside.

The ship which was to take us off turned out to be a destroyer. Refugees and soldiers were swarming aboard her when suddenly the stream halted and began to flow back on to the quay again—why, I never discovered. Then great hose-pipes were dragged along the dock, and the oil poured into the destroyer's innards.

Meanwhile we had lain down on the concrete dockside and were trying with no little success to go to sleep. We were very exhausted after the last few days, and our disappointment about being swept through Padang without a chance of resting, together with the sherry destroyed that will power to go on and on which had been driving us all for the last two days. Collapse had set in, and all I wanted to do was to make my mind a complete blank and sleep. I didn't want to

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have to think again, or to make a decision, or do anything, but was quite content to drift along and let anyone else who wanted to worry. However, the inner man had something to say to that, and when rations were handed out—one small biscuit with a lump of corned beef thereon—I thought mighty hard on any way to get a second biscuit. I didn't get one. Then I dozed again till about midnight, when we were told to come aboard again. This we did, with a lot of bustle and shooing, and while Pineapple went with the wounded party, Morgan, Avery and I found a few square inches on deck and sank into sleep again. None of us really knew or cared just then what was happening, or where we were bound.

I woke up as we cast off and shot astern out of the harbour, and stayed awake until we turned and went ahead, then, pausing to wonder at the size of bow wash and our speed, slept again. An hour or two later we were all disturbed again, and this time discovered we were alongside another warship, which towered over us, and that the passengers were transshipping. Wearily we arose, distinctly chilly, and shivered our way along the decks till some sailors grabbed us and flung us across to the cruiser. We groped along those fresh decks and found a few square inches of space, curled up in them, and slept again.

#### *Monday, 2nd March*

Was awakened at dawn, cold and sore and with a stiff neck, to find a sailor standing over me with a cup of tea. "Morning tea, sir!" God bless the Navy!

When it grew lighter the decks presented a complete shambles with bodies and suit-cases (how people managed to get suit-cases puzzled me at first till I discovered that they'd practically all spent some days in Padang, and had done what



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we'd hoped to do—gone shopping) lying around the guns. The growing light also revealed the cause of my stiff neck, which was a 6-inch shell I'd used as a pillow.

We were taken below and allotted to various wardrooms and messes for meals, and went in for breakfast. This was porridge and bacon and eggs and toast and coffee—just what we'd been dreaming about during those hungry days gone through on a plate of rice. But the Navy hadn't finished. After we'd breakfasted we were adopted by the officers and middies, loaned razors, towels, soap, etc., and having bathed and shaved (hot shower—bliss!) were loaned clean shorts and shirts, while our grubby rags went to the ship's laundry.

I then went up on deck feeling as though I'd bought not, only this cruiser, but the whole Navy as well. We found then that we were aboard H.M.S. *Dragon*, with H.M.S. *Danal* astern and H.M.A.S. *Hobart* ahead—all returning from the battle in the Java seas.

The day passed in a dream of well-being, feeling clean and fed, and when evening came we were issued with blankets to alleviate the hardness of the deck and the coldness of the night. By 9 o'clock we had curled up like cocoons and were fast asleep.

### *Tuesday, 3rd March*

Once again at dawn the morning tea miracle happened, so timed that when one felt ready for the first cigarette, it was already light enough to smoke on deck.

Mid-morning we were told that as *Dragon* was to be diverted to do a touring job, we were to be transferred to H.M.A.S. *Hobart*. Rumour had it that the ex-Straits Steamships Lines' crack *Kedah* was disabled, but we never had confirmation of this. Shortly *Hobart* stopped and we came level, but

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about a quarter mile apart. Looking at it with regard to having to cross it in a small motor launch the sea appeared mountainous—and even worse when I went over the cruiser's rail and down a rope ladder to the launch. However, the crossing was made in safety, and as we neared *Hobart* I saw first one, then another of the P.W.D. on the quarter deck. We were soon aboard, and reunited as before. With the advent of the three of us, and the news of others like Green, Ross, O'Grady and Mitford which we brought, there then remained unaccounted for only Coales, Bean, Murphy and Davies, which was a remarkably small casualty list out of the sixty of us who had left Singapore eighteen days ago.

Apart from meeting up with the rest of the party we were not so pleased with the transfer. The quarter deck was already crowded out with refugees, so we had to go up forrard beyond the bridge, and on the starboard side found some space outside the "recreation room." The feeding was not a patch on the *Dragon* either, being very much of the doorsteps bread and marg., and mug of cocoa school, but as the number of evacuees aboard numbered around 1,200 we could hardly expect banquets. And, brr! the nights were freezing. Lying as we were blanketless and without any shelter the decks became harder and harder, and the wind fresher and fresher, and dawn was only a relief.

#### *Wednesday, 4th March*

No morning tea! And we decided in future to be rescued by the British Navy in preference to the Australian.

Where we were bound was veiled in mystery and secrecy, but most of us plumped for Trincomali, the naval base in Ceylon.

The day was completely uneventful except when we

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listened to Tokyo's broadcast account of the Java seas' battle, during which the sinking of the Australian cruiser *Hobart* was announced.

After supper of corned beef, bread and cocoa we retired to our deck space and laid our protesting limbs out again and slept fitfully.

*Thursday, 5th March*

Shortly after breakfast we passed the Point de Galle, the southernmost tip of Ceylon on the horizon, but instead of making for it we kept on our way. About midday signals were interchanged between *Hobart* and *Danal* and we swung off—towards Colombo. Increasing speed to 30 knots, we shot across the water and reached Colombo around 2 p.m.

## EPILOGUE

*Extract from a letter from Bombay, dated 12th March, 1942*

I left Singapore some forty-eight hours before the capitulation, and after an adventurous trip—the details of which the censor would never pass—reached Ceylon. Suffice it that the journey took twenty days instead of the usual four, and I travelled in fifteen different boats, ranging from a dinghy to a liner, walked about 20 miles, went by lorry, bus, car and train, and even swam for seven and a half hours (!), and arrived in Colombo possessing only the shirt and shorts that I stood up in! From there I came on to Bombay, and am now buying a new wardrobe. The feeling after having slept on a sprung bed and wakened, shaved, bathed, put on clean clothes and filled one's tummy with coffee and bacon and eggs is indescribable!

Nature, however, is ever contrary, for despite all the not inconsiderable hardships, I am fitter now bodily and mentally than ever before, and have mysteriously gained at least half a stone in weight!

What my plans are I cannot say, as I am still awaiting instructions from London.

*Extract from a letter from the Camouflage School, Kirkee, dated 5th April, 1942*

But . . . I've at last got something to do, something to relieve the awful boredom and monotony of doing nothing except mourn for Malaya and all those I had to leave behind. I would care little for the loss of my house, and all that therein was, or my car, or any other material possession, if only I could have got my very faithful, trusting servants out of it, too—if I could even have said good-bye and sent them and

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their families off to fend for themselves instead of having to leave them in that shell-torn house thinking I'd be back any time. And my poor dog with her two ten-day old puppies, terrified of the bombing and shelling, and I didn't even have time to get her destroyed. . . . Oh yes, something to occupy the mind is a great relief. . . .

*Extract from a letter from Bombay, dated 4th May, 1942*

. . . I am to join the Indian Engineers with the rank of Captain, in the "Pool" of camouflage officers . . . and be attached to the staff in Calcutta.

*Extract from a letter from Calcutta, dated 17th November, 1942*

. . . The day I arrived (back from a tour) I went to the doctor and was sent straight into hospital, and here I am. . . . The doctor has diagnosed "Malignant, Hypertension." . . .

*Extract from a letter from Calcutta, dated 3rd December, 1942*

. . . I received my promotion yesterday afternoon and am now Major Inglis!

. . . The specialist who made his rounds yesterday was astonished at my improvement.

*Extract from a letter from Calcutta, dated 6th April, 1943*

. . . And here I am back in hospital again!

. . . Next week some time I shall make the two and a half days dusty journey to Poona to be "boarded." As far as I can gather, this board will recommend that I leave India, although where I go to is an entirely different matter.

*Extract from a letter from Poona, dated 6th December, 1943*

. . . Will these letters from India ever stop! . . . Seven weeks

*Singapore to Colombo*

ago I came to this Hospital Clearing House, as I hopefully thought for a few days, and here I still am. . . . I want to get away, and I want to get home! . . . If it's like this, just waiting in one's own Empire, what must the life of a prisoner of war be like? Count your blessings!

*Extract from a letter from Poona, dated 14th December, 1943*

. . . This really should be the last letter I write you from here, as by all accounts we should have left within the coming week.

*Extract from a letter from the Middle East, dated 5th January, 1944*

. . . We disembarked here yesterday, and are once again doing a spell of indefinite waiting until we tranship. . . .

*Extract from a letter from the Middle East, dated 3rd February, 1944*

. . . And now it's over a month since we arrived, and still no signs of departure—but, oh my! I'm so tired of waiting, waiting in Calcutta to go to Poona, waiting in Poona for a hospital ship from Bombay, and now waiting here in Egypt. . . . Still, everybody hopes for a change in the situation soon . . . and then once aboard the lugger and two—three weeks or so should see me with you.

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*Telegram received from Whitehall, Foreign Office, on 19th February, 1944*

Deeply regret to inform you of report now received that Major C. W. A. Inglis, I.E., died at sea on 15th February. Mr. Secretary Amery desires to offer you his sincere sympathy.

Secretary  
Mil. Dept., India Office